5 STARS! FIND OUT WHICH THREE GAMES GOT **TOP MARKS IN THIS MONTH'S REVIEWS**

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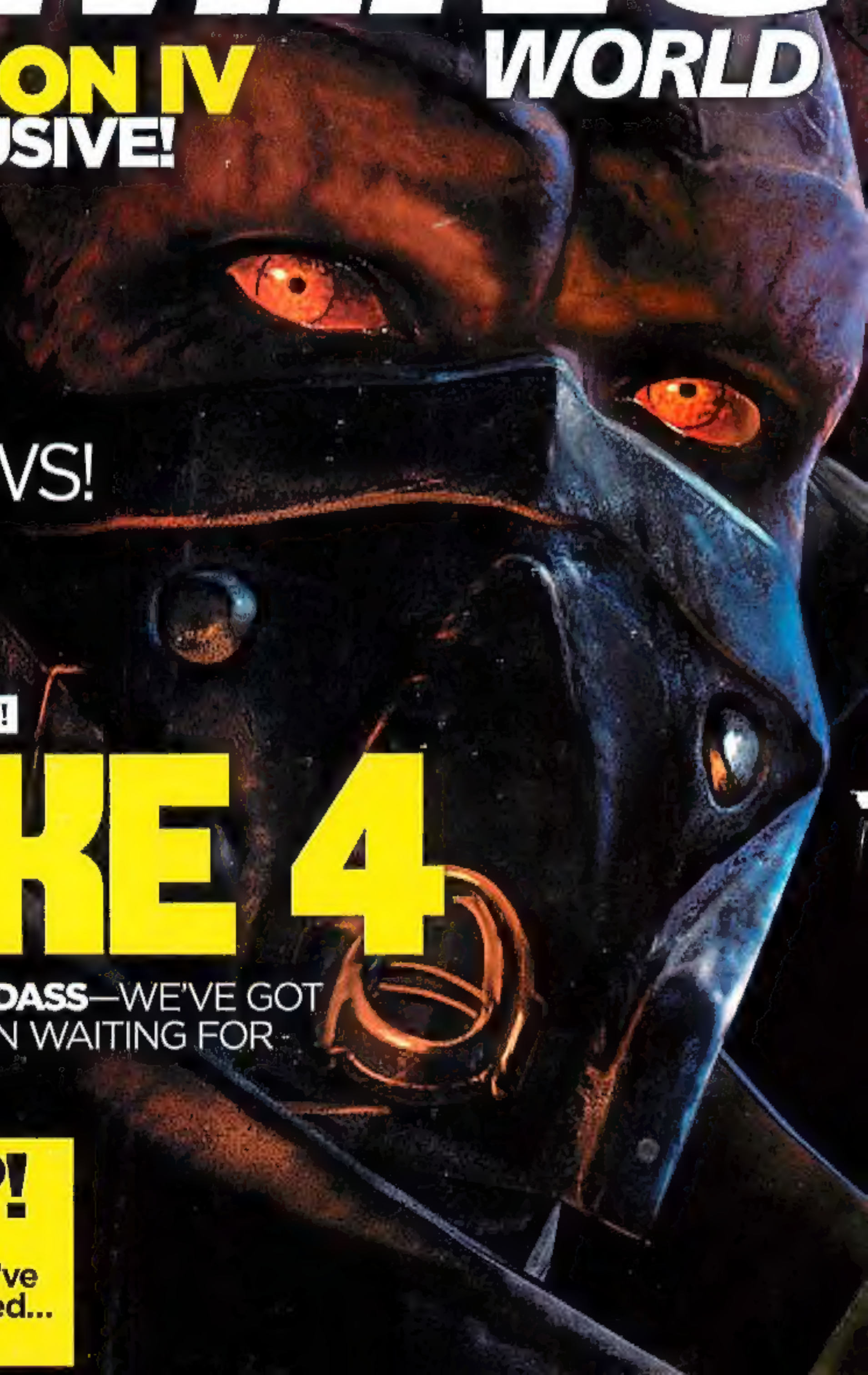

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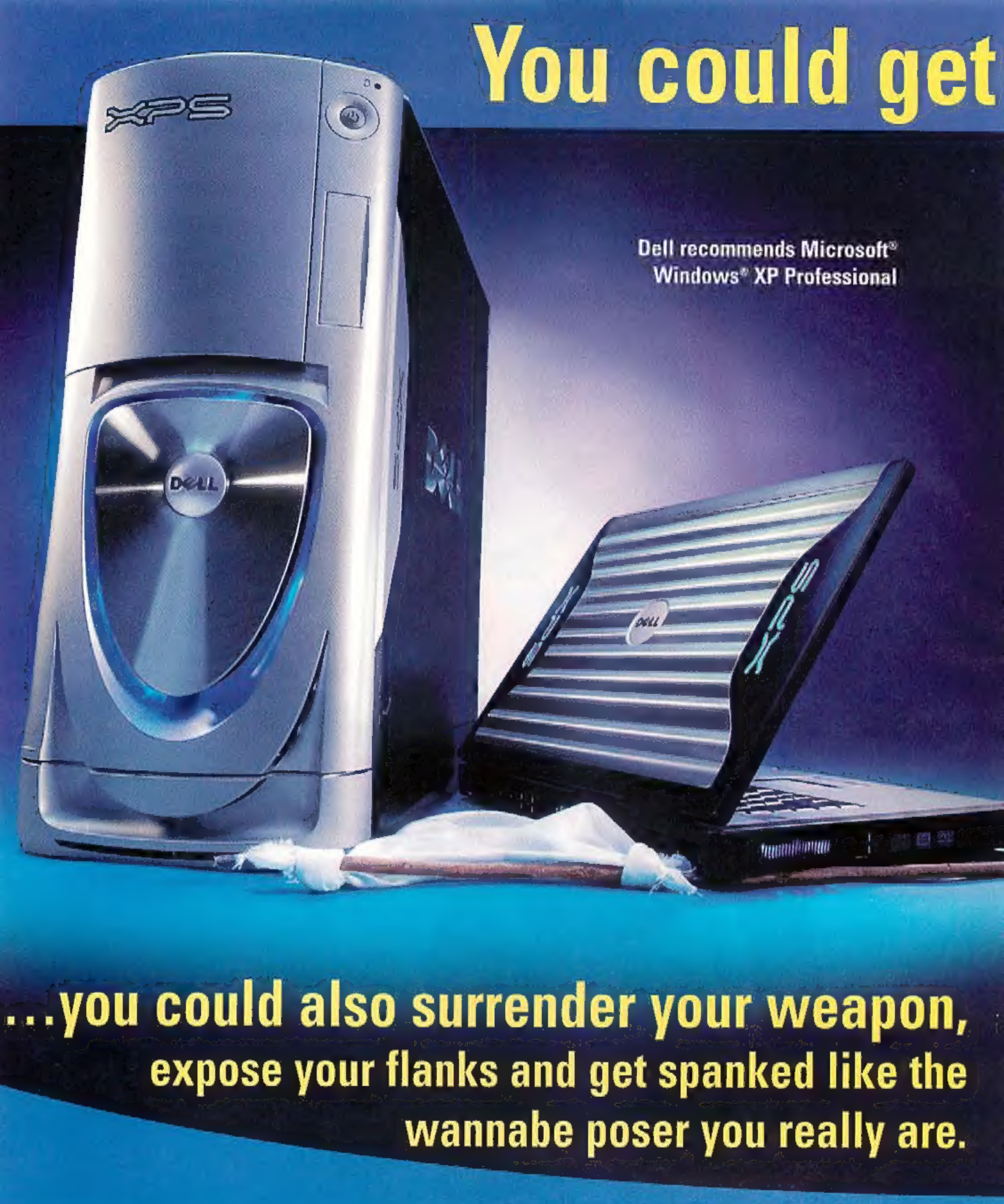

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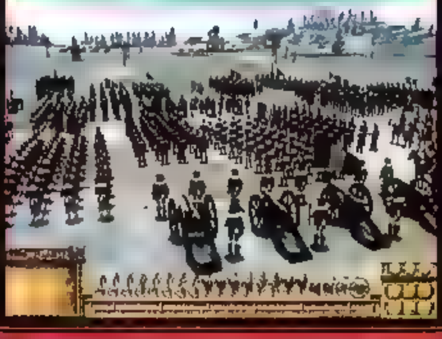

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Contents

June 2005 Issue #252

16 Editorial

Don't hate the folks at Id Software just because they're popular. Hate them because they wouldn't let you carry your flashlight and gun at the same time.

18 Letters

Dear readers,
Please send us better letters.
The Management

24 Radar

Getting back to our investigative roots, we kick off with the first of a two-part story that takes a closer look at the seedier side of online gaming. Then, just when you thought you didn't need to buy any more PC upgrades, it's time to get a physics card. Yay! All this, an update on cool indie game-development stuff, and a new column where we goof around in MMOs await you in this month's Radar.

75 Reviews

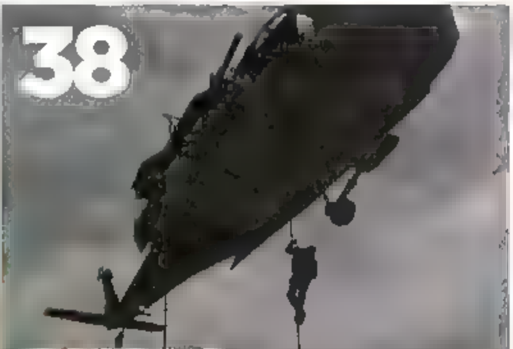
Who needs the holidays? This is the strongest spring for game releases in recent memory, and we couldn't be happier. So buckle your seat belt and clear your social calendar, because after you read our reviews of *SWAT 4*, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, *Psychonauts*, and *Silent Hunter III*, you'll be too busy gaming to mingle with humanity. Need more of a reason to stay inside? Here are a few: *Act of War: Direct Action* and *Empire Earth II*. There are more, but your heart can't take it.

59

COVER STORY

QUAKE 4

Eight years after *Quake II*, id's ready to continue the story with a little help from Raven Software. Jeff flew to Wisconsin, blasted stroggs, and somehow found the time to actually write the story. Behold the massive preview—our look at the legacy of the *Quake* series.



38

2005 E3 SCOUTING REPORT

Wondering what the big games of 2005 will be? Then check out our massive sneak peek at what we expect to see at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo. We still expect plenty of surprises on the show floor, but this will give you a taste of what's to come.

54

CIVILIZATION IV

Remember back when *Civ* first came out and you stopped sleeping, eating, and talking to everyone? Remember how you went on academic probation? Well, guess what? It's time to lose your life again.

REVIEWS

76 Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30
80 Splinter Cell Chaos Theory
82 Psychonauts
84 Act of War: Direct Action
86 Empire Earth II
88 Gary Grigsby's World at War
88 Aerial Strike: The Yager Missions
90 Domination
92 SWAT 4
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94 Dangerous Waters
96 Heritage of Kings: The Settlers

98 Tech

Tech is flat-out ridiculous this month. We take boutique builder Falcon Northwest's ridiculously affordable Talon PC for a spin, tell you whether Apple's ridiculously huge LCD is worth its ridiculous price tag; lust after a DVD+/-RW drive that burns dual-layer discs at ridiculous speeds, and round it all out with a Dell laptop that blew us away with its ridiculous benchmark scores. All that, plus Tech Medics, Tech Commando, and more.

110 Tom vs. Bruce

It's Tom and Bruce to the rescue in *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich*. We're all doomed.

114 Scorched Earth

We all have skeletons in our closets. Robert just has more than the rest of us. And a lot of them still have meat on 'em.

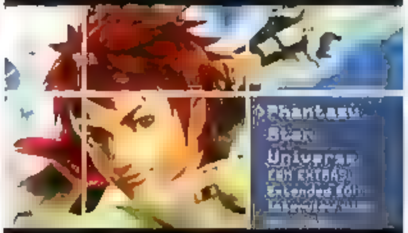
THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

CGWJEFF.1UP.COM

Jeff's pretty excited about his new PSP, which he hasn't dropped yet. And like any good editor-in-chief, he's spent all month playing *Lumines* on said PSP with former *CGW* managing editor Dana Jongewaard instead of writing his *Quake 4* cover story. Jeff is also the proud new owner of a Toyota Prius, which is one of those weird, noiseless hybrid cars that he describes as "the iPod of the automotive world."

WARCRAFTSTORIES.1UP.COM

It's probably all we can do to tear some of you away from *World of WarCraft* at all, but "*WarCraft* Stories" is worth a look, especially if you're a hardcore fan of the game. Here, *GMR* alumnus Andrew Pfister recounts his many adventures in the world of Azoroth, often with humorous results.



PC.1UP.COM

If you flip to our E3 2005 Scouting Report, you'll notice 1UP.com features editor Jeremy Parish's excellent synopsis of Will Wright's upcoming game *Spore*. But there's much more to it than that—if you're interested in getting the full story on what is sure to be one of the biggest games of 2005, be sure to check out Jeremy's full preview on 1UP.com.

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Of Id and Ego

When being great isn't good enough

If they weren't so unbelievably rich and successful, you could almost feel sorry for the guys at id Software. Almost. Well, OK, not really. Still, there are days when I can imagine that it must suck to be them. Here they are, some of the most important and influential game developers in the history of the business—directly responsible for some of the biggest technological advances (and awesome experiences) in gaming for over a decade now—and yet these days they can't buy a break from some gamers. *Doom 3* is disappointing, people say. It doesn't measure up to *Half-Life 2*. The multiplayer blows. You can't hold a freaking flashlight and gun at the same time. We waited all these years...for this?

The fact is, id's reputation is so strong, and expectations were so high, that *Doom 3* was, well, err, doomed to be considered a "disappointment." Personally, I loved it—and all these months later I'm not embarrassed to say it. Which is why I leapt at the chance to do this month's cover story on *Quake 4*. Because as much as I've always loved the *Doom* games, it's the *Quake* franchise to which I have lost the most waking hours. It's the game that taught me the joys of multiplayer, how to mouse-look, and, most important of all, how to camp the quad damage.

The folks at id and Raven Software have a lot planned for *Quake 4*. Their biggest plan: to shut up all the people who complained about *Doom 3*. Will they do it? And even if I said yes, would you believe me? Oh, sweet mysteries of life.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?

[illegible]

[illegible]

Holy Toledo! It's baseball season [illegible], which means all is right in [illegible] world—and that's good, since Psychonauts kinda threw her for a loop in a fascinating, where's-my-Zoloft sort of way.

1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com

Now Playing: Psychonauts, PSP games, shortstop

ROBERT COFFEY

[illegible]

1UP.com Blog: [illegible]

Now Playing: World of WarCraft, SWAT 4, [illegible]

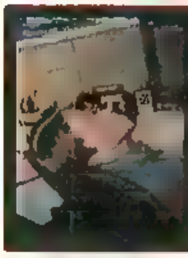
DARREN GLADSTONE

SENIOR EDITOR

[illegible]

1UP.com Blog: [illegible]

Now Playing: SWAT 4, Freedom Force [illegible]



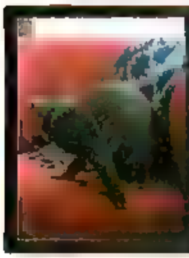
RYAN SCOTT

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Ryan's got a shout-out to Tom Edwards, Greg Ford, and Susie Ochs. Those three brave copy editors translate *CGW*'s text into English, plus keep us doped up on the sugary snacks that keep us going month after month.

1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com

Now Playing: Splinter Cell Chaos Theory, Lumines (PSP)



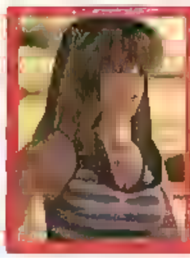
MICHAEL JENNINGS

ART DIRECTOR

[illegible] day listening to *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou Soundtrack* on repeat and watching Jerry Springer. The next time the Brazilian rendition of "Rock & Roll Suicide" comes on, Jennings will be short an easy chair.

1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com

Now Playing: Knights of the Old [illegible]



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Now Playing: [illegible] Beach Volleyball—in her mind

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TOUGH LOVE

I consider myself not only a gamer, but a supercool individual as well, and when I heard the term "gaming community" thrown around, I assumed that this "community" was a collection of supercool people such as myself. However, I recently entered a gaming tournament and was astonished to find out that the other people involved were all card-holding members of the dork squad. It was an Xbox tournament, so please restore my faith in humanity by saying that PC gamers are different, OK? I hope I'm not the only supercool one out there.

VoodooWazoo

Uh, dear VoodooWazoo, you are...um...ah, who're we kidding? You call yourself VoodooWazoo. VoodooWazoo, for cryin' out loud. Do we really need to do the math?

CROUPIER GROUPIER

Privateer 2: The Darkening—back when you guys ho-hummed it, you forgot the main reason for playing the game besides fun...Clive Owen. If the idiots would have made it for Win 95, I'd still be playing it. Love your mag anyway.

Angry Grandma

Yeah, Clive Owen was about the only decent thing in that game. Little did we know that years later li'l Clive would be nominated for an Academy Award, just like the one his *Darkening* costar Christopher Walken had already won. Sadly, not all FMV actors have fared as well. That guy from *Gabriel Knight 2*? There's a warrant out on him in Barstow.

GIT ALONG, LI'L KITTIES

I was casually reading the April 2005 issue of *CGW* when I noticed that Tom Chick used the phrase "herding cats" in two separate articles (*Empire Earth II* preview and Tom vs. Bruce). Has Tom actually tried herding cats? How come he is such an expert on the subject?

Alex Jasso

Thank you, Alex, for giving us the opportunity to discuss Tom Chick's second career and greatest passion: rodeo clown. As his alter ego Li'l Opus, Mr. Chick has set the feline-shepherding world aflame with his crazy antics and preternatural skill.

HE SAID "PATHETIC," NOT US

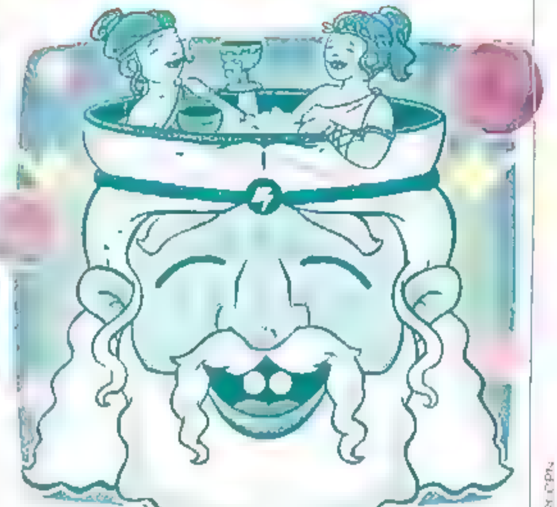
OK, guys, I know you were disappointed by *Episodes I* and *II*. But your constant insulting of *Star Wars* is beating a dead horse—and not the good one from *The Godfather*. You geeks know damn well you are going to be in line come May 19. So don't pretend that Anakin's fall to the dark side isn't going to change your lives forever. And how can you not be excited about *Lego Star Wars*, man? That's like my pathetic, lonely childhood wrapped up into one package!

Matt Pulkrabek

Oh, Matt, you're not like other readers. Their skin is rough, like sand, but your skin is not like sand. It is smooth, and we like that.

Letter of the Month

Sorry to interrupt your self-flagellation on page 113 of your April 2005 (Issue #250) magazine. However, under "How not to sound smart," you correct yourself, saying, "that would be Athena, not Minerva." The problem is that Minerva is (essentially) the name the Romans gave Athena. So while it might have been slightly more correct to say "Athena leapt full grown from the brain of her father Zeus" or "Minerva leapt full grown from the brain of her father Jupiter," you aren't actually confusing your deities...only slightly confusing the proper name to use in context for the same deity.



Zvi Rosen

While we applaud your mastery of pointless information, Zvi, we confess we are disinclined to disagree with you. There is still a distinction to be drawn—however fine—between two seemingly similar personalities, for example, Tito and Jermaine, Gummo and Zeppo, Bea Arthur and pro football Hall of Famer Lawrence "LT" Taylor.

SEND US YOUR LOVE!

[illegible] Then fire off [illegible] to CGW. Like prisoners, we look forward to word from the outside world. Give us a fleeting glimpse of life beyond the cold Ziff Davis walls [illegible]

Why Johnny Can't Read

Don't worry, readers, your eyes are just fine. An unfortunate printing error in issue #250 resulted in some hard-to-read portions of the magazine. The issue has been resolved, and for all of you who wrote in wondering just what were Robert's Five Most Influential Games, here you go: *Earl Weaver Baseball*, *X-Com: UFO Defense*, *Dungeon Master*, *Half-Life*, and *The Sims*.

Mail Bites

Is there any chance we'll ever see updates of *X-Com*, *Jagged Alliance*, or *Master of Magic*?
—Martin A. Stever

That was pretty smooth, working the Talking Heads theme into the *KOTOR II* review. However, do that again and I'll cut ya.
—Rob Burnham

Those of us over 50 who love your magazine are wondering: What is with the white font?
—The Old Fat Broad and Bob in Canada

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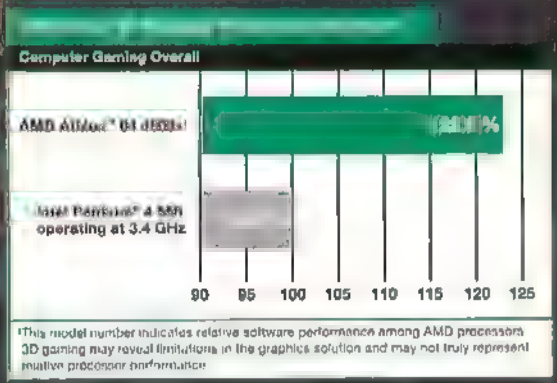

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VIRTUAL Sin Cit

PIMPS, HOOKERS, SCAMMERS, AND CON MEN AWAIT YOU. WELCOME TO THE MMO UNDERWORLD

The "love house" in *The Sims Online* is open for business. One sim, in a leather outfit, dances in a cage. Another scantily clad female selects the "plead" action, making it look like she's giving a lap dance. Before long, a member of the Sims Underground Mafia swaggers in and loans money for a cyber session. There's more to the dark side of MMO gaming than red-light districts, but nobody is really talking about it. Consider this your field guide to surviving the seamier side of online living...and keep a close eye on your game pieces. ■ James Lee

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES MIELKE

inside
Rookies Indy game developers gathered and competed at GDC for top honors. Who won?
32 **Physical** Forget 3D cards in the future, you'll likely need to buy physics cards.
34 **MMO Mayhem** Not satisfied doing it in the office, we're going online to goof off. Check out our new column!

THE PIMP: TALK NERDY TO ME

All male gamers are suckers for these digitized dames, and knowing that Robert Coffey posed as an exotic dancer in *Star Wars Galaxies* back in November 2003, a feeling of "ick" suddenly sets in. Is it really a surprise to anyone at this point that the "women" in these MMO games are mostly men in their mid-30s? Still, we got set up with a cyber session, which cost us 6,000 simoleans, and, as usual, something went horribly wrong.

CGW > This is my first time, be gentle.
anonymous > Don't be scared.
anonymous > Bet you some hot action would love.
CGW > You totally just sounded like Yoda there.
anonymous > Ewwww.
CGW > No, it's cool. I want you to talk to me like Yoda.
anonymous > I want you to ride me all night.
CGW > No, say it like Yoda. You were paid, right?
anonymous > And how is Yoda supposed to say it?
CGW > Ride me all night you do.
anonymous > OK that will work.
CGW > C'mon it turns me on. Do it like Yoda!
anonymous > I don't know if I can do it that way. I'm kinda new at this.
CGW > I want my 6k back.

THE PROFITEER: SKIMMING OFF THE TOP

Crafty "crafters" can quickly take you to the cleaners. For example, in *World of WarCraft*, a blacksmith will offer to make you a pearl-handled dagger. "You supply materials needed; I make it for free," he broadcasts. It requires two pearls, but the blacksmith asks for three and pockets one for himself.

THE GET-RICH-QUICK GRIFTER: GREED IS GOOD

Both in games and in real life, people want the easy payoff. During the holidays, scammers randomly messaged in *World of WarCraft*: "Here is one gold for your Christmas present! Spend it wisely!" In truth, it was a request for one gold. Hapless victims, giddy about the incoming cash, would OK the money transfer without looking.

Malashin from askchopper.com, an *Ultima Online* exploit website, likes the "vendor lotto" scam: He would put crates on his vendor for 20,000 gold per crate, then announce that the crates held rare items and checks for 1 million gold. Of course, they didn't. A plant in the crowd "wins" some prize. Everyone else gets screwed.

THE CROOK: BREAKING AND ENTERING

Going the less-subtle route, other sneaks use programs such as the Leveler. This program lets players in *Ultima Online* see through ceilings of houses and loot valuable items.

THE CON MAN: KEEPING FRIENDS CLOSE AND ENEMIES CLOSER

Jetblack is a social engineer. He'll pose as your friend and rob you blind later. First, he stalks someone, listening for personal information. After posing as a close friend, he says something like "Hey, check out what I found" and then hands over a rare item to his prey. "It's risky," he adds, "but essential to gain trust."

The best swindlers have even fooled GMs that monitor for shady activity. After exploiting a bug, these scammers report it and slowly convince game developers that they're invaluable. Once they become friends with the developers, they get accounts that can't be banned, and they always have an excuse in hand (they're doing it for the developers) if they're ever caught exploiting a bug.

THE PASSWORD STEALERS: BIG HACK ATTACK

Always use long passwords on your accounts and never share them with anyone. Eight to nine characters with numbers, letters, symbols, and capital letters is what you should aim for; it would take a Pentium III at least six weeks to try all the possibilities of that kind of combo.

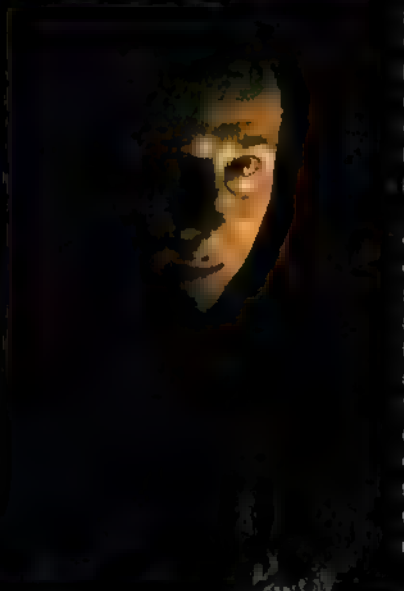
Contributing to fan forums can also spell trouble. Phpbb is an easy, free forum anyone can install on their site. However, use anything older than version 2.0.9 and anyone can get a look at your passwords. Many people use the same usernames and passwords in forums and games. Don't.

UO lets players run their own shards, or servers, so others can play for free. However, all login information can be viewed by the host. Scammers could create legit-looking websites for their hosted servers to swipe your info. Only go to trusted sites. ■

Watch your back online! Scammers are just waiting to take advantage of you. Come back next month to read part two of our investigation.

IMPENDING DOOM

First-person silver screen spoilers ahead



Doom nears. The film has finished shooting and is set to hit theaters on August 5th. We were among the lucky few allowed on the set.

The film stars Karl Urban (best known for his role as Rohan warrior Eomer in The Lord of the Rings trilogy) and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (best known for beating the crap out of other wrestlers). And no, neither is playing the Dr. Willits or Dr. Carmack roles written into the flick in honor of the id Software's Tim Willits and John Carmack.

Just brace yourself for a fe[illegible] changes to the plot: Rather t[illegible] demon infestation on Phobos [illegible] Space Marines (trussed more like a Space SWAT team) are fighting a bunch of monsters spawned by a supervirus—and, technically, [illegible] Winston Studios. At least there's a BFG (yeah, sure, it stands for Bio Force Gun) and one action sequence that takes place in a first-person perspective. Wanna know more about the movie? Check back next month.

AT THE MOVIES

Movies based on games don't exactly have the best track record. But when we heard that Andrzej Bartkowiak—who worked on *Thirteen Days* and *The Devil's Advocate*—was making *Doom* R rated, we felt a little better. For a little perspective, let's see how well some other game films have done.

Wing Commander (1999)
Director: Chris Roberts
Budget: $30 million US
Gross: $11.6 million US

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (2001)
Director: Hironobu Sakaguchi
Budget: $137 million US
Gross: $32.1 million US

Resident Evil (2002)
Director: Paul W.S. Anderson
Budget: $35 million US
Gross: $39.5 million US

Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003)
Director: Jan de Bont
Budget: $90 million US
Gross: $65.7 million US

Alone in the Dark (2005)
Director: Uwe Boll
Budget: $20 million US
Gross: $5.1 million US
In theaters two whole weeks!

IN DEVELOPMENT

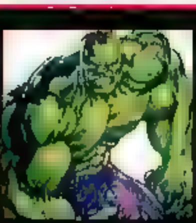
Bloodrayne (2005)

Far Cry (2006)
Director: Uwe Boll

Silent Hill (2006)
Director: Christophe "Brotherhood of [illegible]

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

June 2005



The Good

So Sue Us

Marvel's lawsuit against NCsoft—which claims that *City of Heroes* players can use the game to copy character designs owned by Marvel—has run into a snag. The judge ordered that some of the evidence be stricken as "false and a sham" when it became clear that some of the copyright-infringing in-game characters were created by Marvel itself. We appreciate Marvel's attempts to protect us from dangerous intellectual-property crime sprees, but if it really wants to serve the public, it should stop making *Punisher* movies.

The Bad

No Refunds

Full Spectrum Warrior was developed as a training tool for the Army. But recently, Lt. Col. Jim Riley, chief of tactics at the Infantry school at Fort Benning, GA, said that the game is rarely used because "it's not accurate enough." Unfortunately, the Army couldn't return the game, so we're out 5 million bucks. Try selling it to Canada on eBay.

The Ugly

Crazy-talk Tycoon

Overheard during one GDC panel in which independent developers complained about the state of the industry: "My thesis is that we are contributing to the damage that the spectacle does to human beings by suggesting the interactivity of a joystick is real agency.... The spectacle trains us to be consumers. We are urged to keep the economy healthy, pay our bills. Did you ever notice there's no place for the *earth* on the bottom line?" Um, yeah....

NEWS FEED

>> 555-DOOM. John Carmack, annoyed by the lack of good cell-phone games, is creating a *Doom*-ish RPG optimized for cellies. >> Author Cory Doctorow is promoting his new novel with a virtual book tour. His first stop? The MMO, *Second Life*. >>

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Small game developers get big recognition at Independent Games Festival

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THAT WAS THEN: JUNE 1988

Looking back at the way we were

Beef: It's what was for dinner. In June of 1988, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)—the artist formerly known as "mad cow disease"—screwed it up for meatatarians everywhere. Speaking of dead meat, Mike Tyson became the undisputed heavyweight champion this month by knocking out Michael Spinks in a minute and a half, long before he tried snacking on Evander Holyfield's ear.

Enough with this food talk, we're getting hungry! So let's dig into the archives and find out what was going on in *CGW*. First, Tom Clancy fans were delighted to see our *Hunt for Red October* review, and it was only a couple of years later that the movie came out. Is there anything better than seeing Sean Connery pose as a Russian with his trademark Scottish accent? Didn't think so. Will the same happen with the stellar series *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*? We can only hope.

Also in the issue were the Microprose's *Project Stealth Fighter*, *Mech Brigade*, and *Wasteland* tips, along with a spectacularly awful review of EA's *Return to Atlantis*. The best content, however, was found in our *Bard's Tale III* review subheads: "Something Old," "Something New," "Something Borrowed," and "Something Brute," proving we were just as corny then as we are now. ⊠

NEWS FEED >>EQbay. To combat scammers, SOE will soon have a sanctioned trading site where you have to pay a nominal ($1 - $5) fee to post ads. Yay! >> And, starting May 17th, SOE is casting for a spokesmodel in a very Hot-or-Not way at www.questforantonia.com.>>

So who are you?

Ryan Walden aka Ground-N-Pound78

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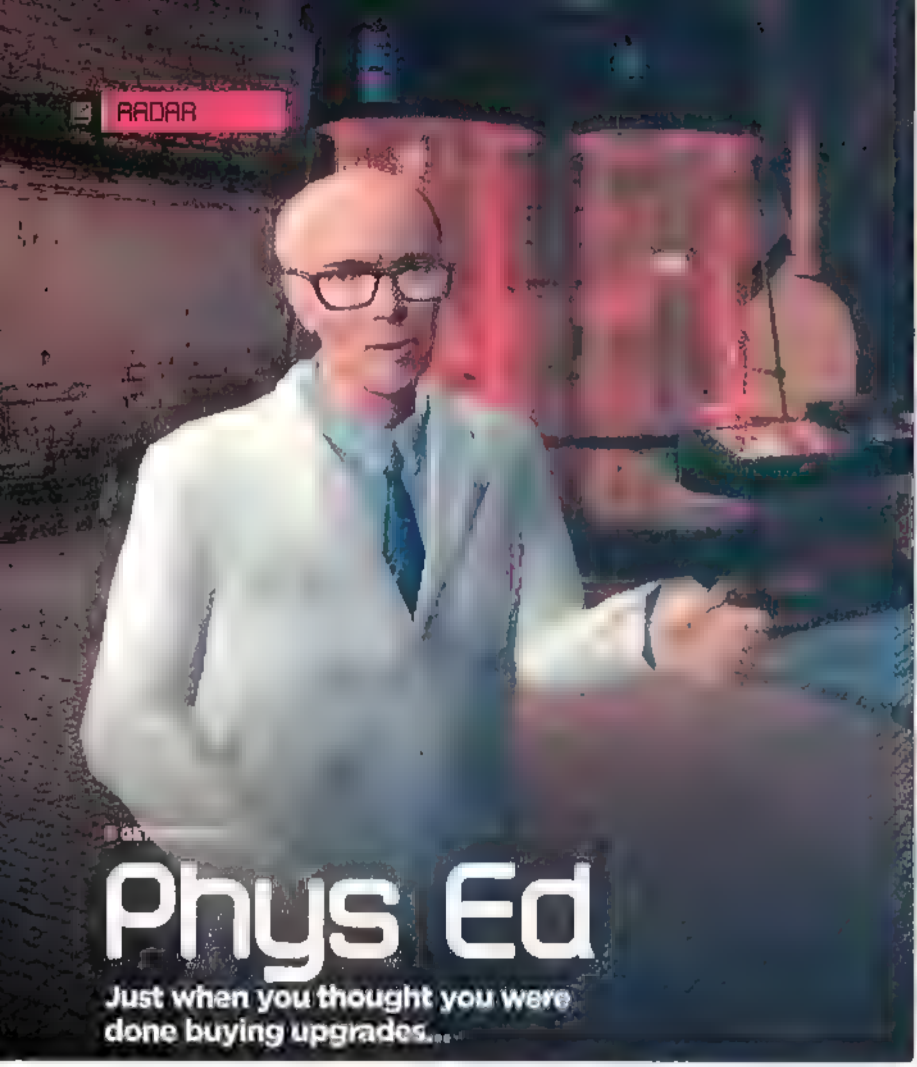
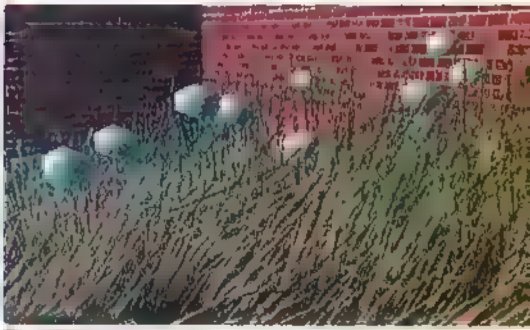


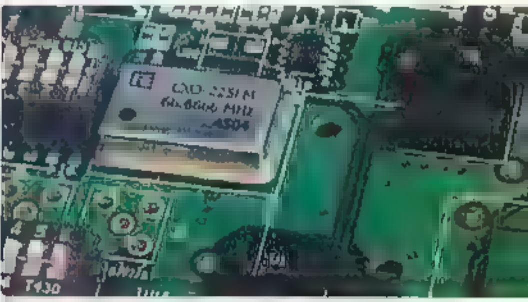
Phys Ed

Just when you thought you were done buying upgrades...

Havok physics is all done in software.



Individual blades of grass can move realistically with physics.



The way things are going, you'll soon need hardware for high-performance physics in games.

In 1995, the whole idea of a 3D graphics card was a hard sell. "Why sink over 200 extra dollars into even *more* hardware for my new computer when the software emulation mode works just fine?" It took seeing Lara Croft bounce around in all her polygonal glory back in 1996 to start jaws dropping. For others, it took playing *Quake* in OpenGL. Today, we can't imagine playing any game without some kind of 3D card under the hood. Even strategy games, the last holdouts for 2D, require top-notch tech to look their best. That's why the following news shouldn't come as a shock: You will one day need to buy yet another card for gaming, but it won't make for more lifelike texture maps. It will calculate physics.

CRY, HAVOK

Ageia, a fabless semiconductor company (translation: it designs the technology but doesn't produce the boards), announced recently that it is working on the first physics processing unit (don't know if we should call it a "PPU," but there you have it), PhysX. With this announcement come huge implications for gamers. In the same way that the GPU now handles the graphical heavy lifting for CPUs, CEO and chairman Dr. Manju Hegde envisions a separate card juggling all the physics processing.

TODAY: SOFTWARE

Havok physics. You see it touted on boxes and featured in games like *Half-Life 2*, but what does it really mean? The first time you use the gravity gun, you understand. Balls bounce, bricks fall, and bodies flop around like an old busted doll. But since it's all done with software, you've got limitations. For every table you can kick over, there are only so many other things you can manipulate at a time. A current top-end Pentium 4 or Athlon 64 can support roughly 30 to 40 active objects onscreen. So game developers use tricks to fool the player—take a potshot at a wall and the resulting hole is usually a painted-on decal texture. Hegde says, "That is all an illusion." Basically, if you have a rocket launcher, it should be able to punch a hole through that brick wall. A little more realism in games sure would be nice, right?

TOMORROW: HARDWARE

The obvious bonus for using a PPU is that it frees up the CPU to handle other tasks (enemy AI... would be nice...). Suddenly, instead of 30 to 40 objects, your games can handle 32,000 to 40,000 different objects onscreen at once—and they can be manipulated with realistic physics thanks to this new card in your computer. Break down walls or knock over entire buildings instead of having animators re-creating the crashes; the PPU does the calculations for you and the results are randomized. This means it'll require fewer people and they'll be able to create incredibly detailed worlds faster than ever before. Imagine playing *Battlefield Vietnam*, and as you slowly creep through the brush, each individual plant is getting knocked around—giving away your position.

To take advantage of the PhysX PPU, developers will need to work with subsidiary NovodeX, a software physics engine similar to Havok. Worried that nobody is going to support it? Don't be. NovodeX is the official physics program for Epic Games' Unreal Engine 3. And that is just the start.

How much will a PPU card cost? No solid answers yet, but, according to Hegde, expect third-party boards that are compatible with PCI Express 1x/4x and normal PCI to be available on store shelves by the holidays.

Darren Gladstone

NEWS FEED Some of you may be saying, "Hey! Where is Gladstone and that scoop Darren had about Microsoft?!" Hang in there, kids. I just got too excited about these physics developments and wrote way too much. Next month, back to MS-land. Promise.

GAME OF THE YEAR

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WARHAMMER 40,000
DAWN OF WAR

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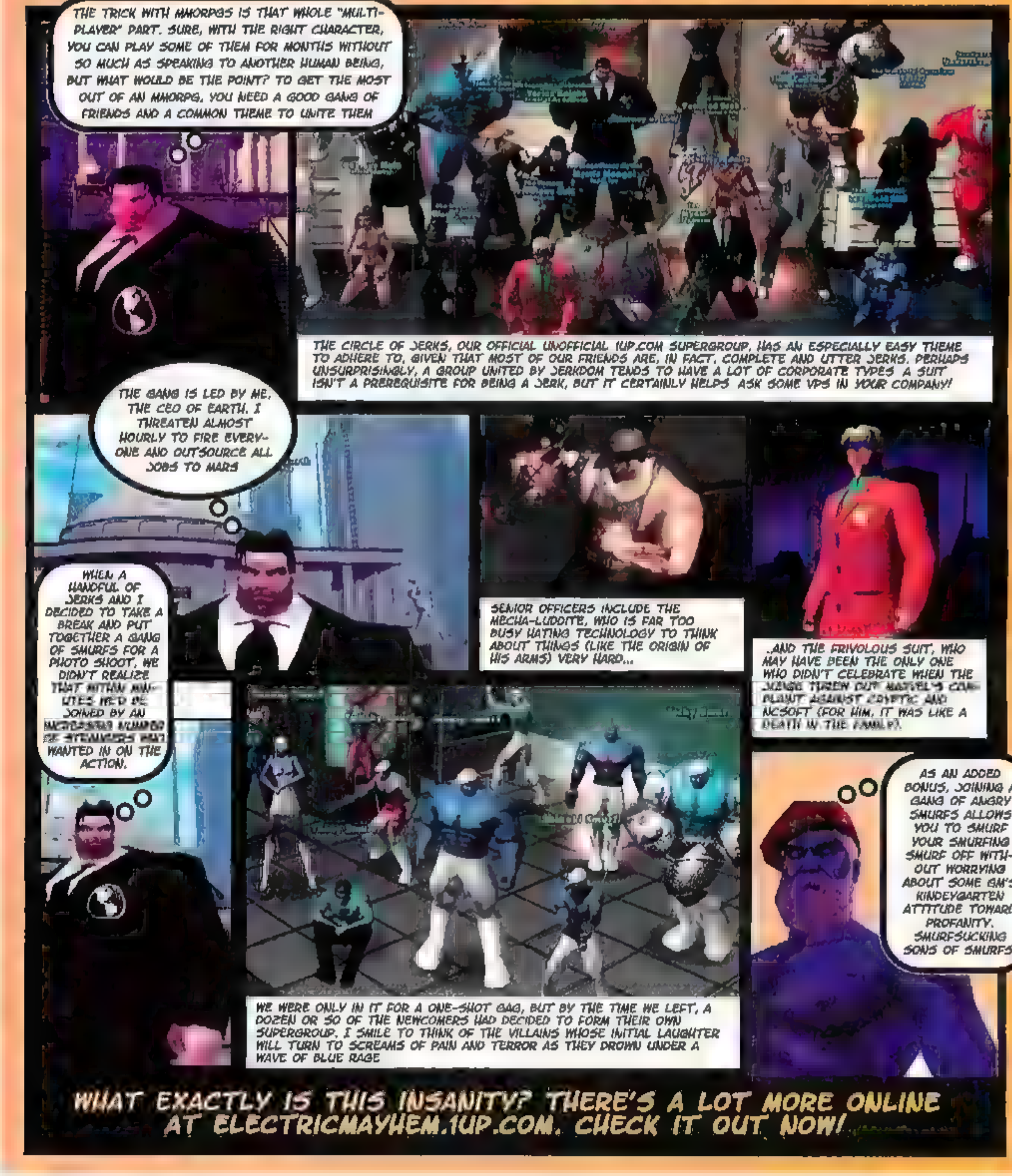
Electric Mayhem

Behold! A new column where we mess around in MMOs. This month's victim: *City of Heroes*


THE TRICK WITH MMORPGS IS THAT WHOLE "MULTIPLAYER" PART. SURE, WITH THE RIGHT CHARACTER, YOU CAN PLAY SOME OF THEM FOR MONTHS WITHOUT SO MUCH AS SPEAKING TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING, BUT WHAT WOULD BE THE POINT? TO GET THE MOST OUT OF AN MMORPG, YOU NEED A GOOD GANG OF FRIENDS AND A COMMON THEME TO UNITE THEM.
THE CIRCLE OF JERKS, OUR OFFICIAL UNOFFICIAL 1UP.COM SUPERGROUP, HAS AN ESPECIALLY EASY THEME TO ADHERE TO, GIVEN THAT MOST OF OUR FRIENDS ARE, IN FACT, COMPLETE AND UTTER JERKS. PERHAPS UNSURPRISINGLY, A GROUP UNITED BY JERKDOM TENDS TO HAVE A LOT OF CORPORATE TYPES. A SUIT ISN'T A PREREQUISITE FOR BEING A JERK, BUT IT CERTAINLY HELPS. ASK SOME VPS IN YOUR COMPANY!
THE GANG IS LED BY ME, THE CEO OF EARTH. I THREATEN ALMOST HOURLY TO FIRE EVERYONE AND OUTSOURCE ALL JOBS TO MARS.
SENIOR OFFICERS INCLUDE THE MECHA-LUDDITE, WHO IS FAR TOO BUSY HATING TECHNOLOGY TO THINK ABOUT THINGS (LIKE THE ORIGIN OF HIS ARMS) VERY HARD...
...AND THE FRIVOLOUS SUIT, WHO MAY HAVE BEEN THE ONLY ONE WHO DIDN'T CELEBRATE WHEN THE JUDGE THREW OUT MARVEL'S COMPLAINT AGAINST CRYPTIC AND NCSOFT (FOR HIM, IT WAS LIKE A DEATH IN THE FAMILY).
WHEN A HANDFUL OF JERKS AND I DECIDED TO TAKE A BREAK AND PUT TOGETHER A GANG OF SMURFS FOR A PHOTO SHOOT, WE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT WITHIN MINUTES WE'D BE JOINED BY AN INCREASING NUMBER OF STRANGERS WHO WANTED IN ON THE ACTION.
WE WERE ONLY IN IT FOR A ONE-SHOT GAG, BUT BY THE TIME WE LEFT, A DOZEN OR SO OF THE NEWCOMERS HAD DECIDED TO FORM THEIR OWN SUPERGROUP. I SMILE TO THINK OF THE VILLAINS WHOSE INITIAL LAUGHTER WILL TURN TO SCREAMS OF PAIN AND TERROR AS THEY DROWN UNDER A WAVE OF BLUE RAGE.
AS AN ADDED BONUS, JOINING A GANG OF ANGRY SMURFS ALLOWS YOU TO SMURF YOUR SMURFING SMURF OFF WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT SOME GM'S KINDEYGARTEN ATTITUDE TOWARD PROFANITY. SMURFSUCKING SONS OF SMURFS.
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IN STORES APRIL 28, 2005

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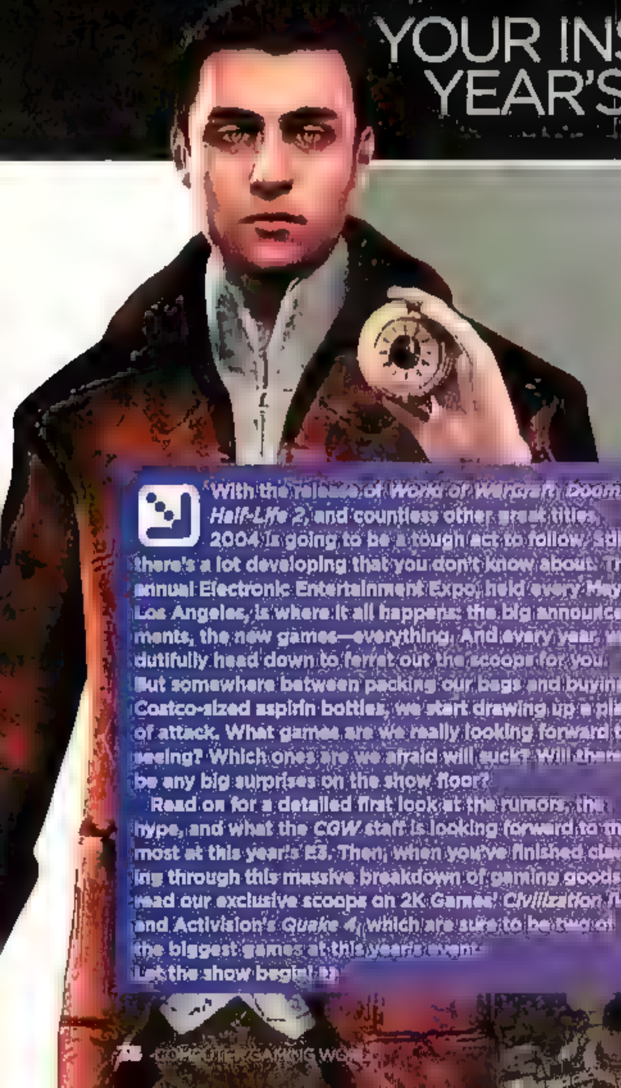
2005 E3 SCOUTING REPORT

BY THE EDITORS OF CGW

YOUR INSIDE TRACK TO THE YEAR'S HOTTEST GAMES

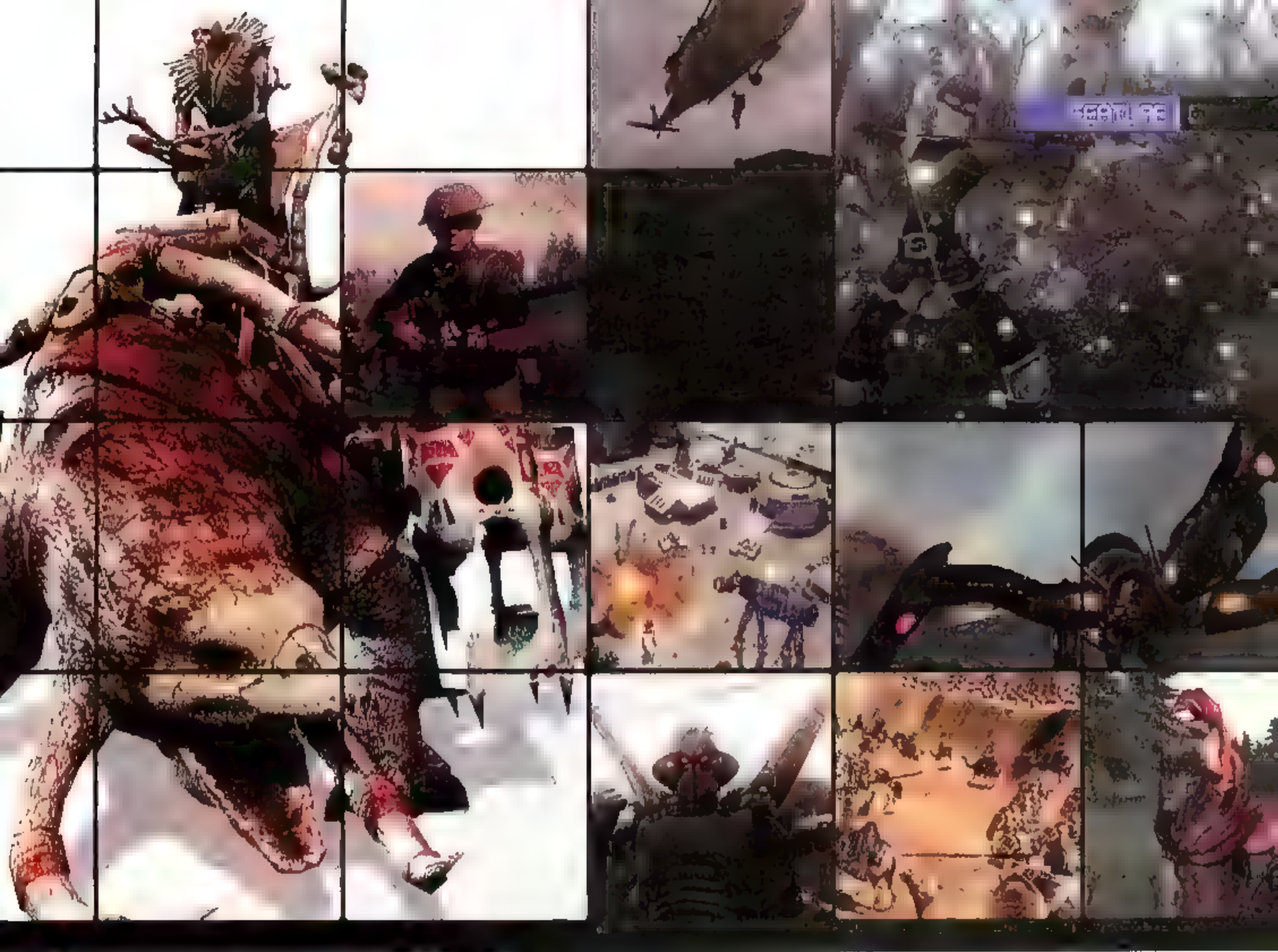


With the release of *World of Warcraft*, *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, and countless other great titles, 2004 is going to be a tough act to follow. Still, there's a lot developing that you don't know about. The annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, held every May in Los Angeles, is where it all happens: the big announcements, the new games—everything. And every year, we dutifully head down to ferret out the scoops for you. But somewhere between packing our bags and buying Costco-sized aspirin bottles, we start drawing up a plan of attack. What games are we really looking forward to seeing? Which ones are we afraid will suck? Will there be any big surprises on the show floor?

Read on for a detailed first look at the rumors, the hype, and what the *CGW* staff is looking forward to the most at this year's E3. Then, when you've finished clawing through this massive breakdown of gaming goods, read our exclusive scoops on 2K Games' *Civilization IV* and Activision's *Quake 4*, which are sure to be two of the biggest games at this year's event.

Let the show begin!

Don't expect any of the historically themed set dressing of the original *Rise of Nations*. This follow-up is rife with fantastical creatures, magic spells, and steampunk-inspired technology. It's a decidedly different atmosphere laced with *RON*'s now-classic gameplay elements.



RISE OF NATIONS 2

Big Huge Games' next big huge RTS

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: **BIG HUGE GAMES** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **TBA**

Scouting Key

- MVP
- Rumor Mill
- Franchise Players
- Rookies To Watch
- Switch Hitters
- Delay of Game
- Make or Break

The original *Rise of Nations* took the tried-and-true *Age of Empires* RTS formula a step further, melding it with concepts from turn-based games such as *Civilization*. The result was a seamless marriage between the two subgenres, and now developer Big Huge Games is looking to strike gold again with its ambitious follow-up, tentatively titled *Rise of Nations 2*.

Unlike its loosely history-based predecessor, *RON2* taps into a *WarCraft*-style fantasy vein, replacing the infantrymen and tanks with magic users and airships. It is set in the world of Aio, where conflict is brewing between the forces of magic and technology. The single-player campaign follows a young inventor as he travels through the great nations of the world, meeting new allies and discovering ancient secrets while war erupts around him.

RISE OF NATIONS 40K

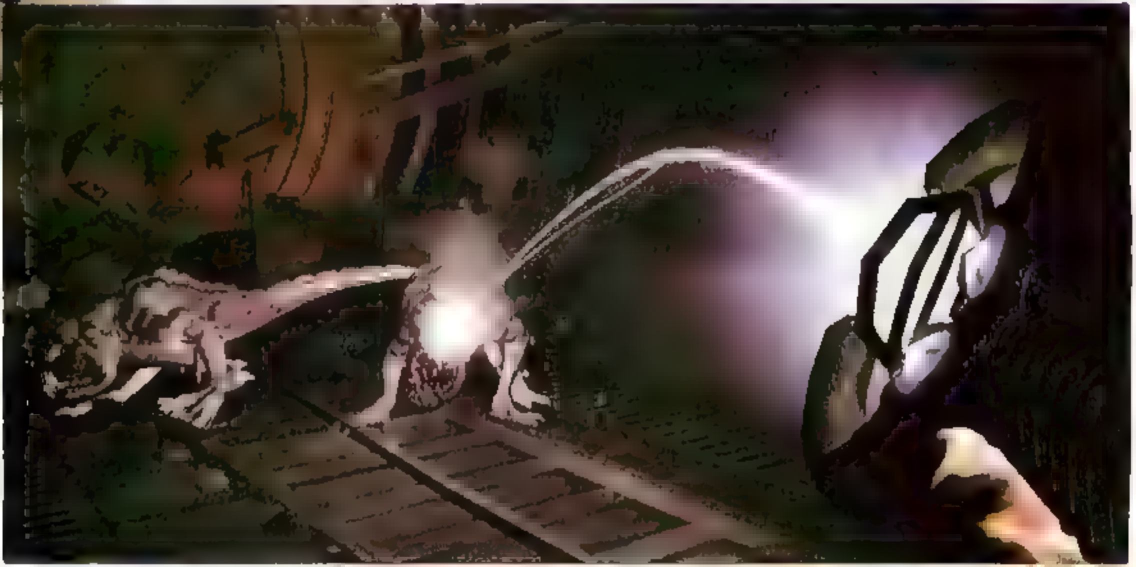
The change of scenery is an interesting choice—and if we had to venture a guess, we'd say it was likely inspired in no small part by the success of recent games such as *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* and *Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth*. Aside from the new set dressing—which, as you can see, is powered by a detailed new graphical engine—*RON2* aims to tweak a few gameplay conventions as well. Your tactical decisions during real-time combat will now affect the various factors on the world map, which brings a vaguely *Total War*-ish aspect to the gameplay. We've also been told that *RON* staples such as national borders and technology trees will be taken "to the next level," though we're not quite sure what that means just yet.

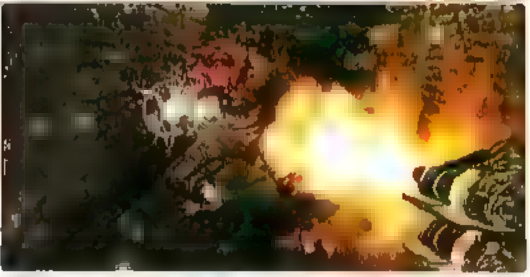
Unsurprisingly, further gameplay details are still wrapped in mystery. Big Huge Games is taking a "when it's done" stance in terms of announcing a ship date, and we're told the game is in its "final year of development," which implies that it's been in the making for quite a while now. And given the talented pedigree behind *RON2*—*Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri* mastermind Brian Reynolds is at the helm of the project—we're expecting the end product to display the high quality that fans of the original *RON* will naturally expect. Between this, Microsoft's *Age of Empires III*, and LucasArts' *Star Wars Empire at War*, it looks like this could be yet another great year to be an RTS fan. **Ryan Scott**

HELLGATE: LONDON

Flagship Studios' maiden voyage

[illegible] NAMCO DEVELOPER: **FLAGSHIP STUDIOS** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **2006**





☒ Mmmm, mmm! The best thing about cooking s'mores is the crunchy, demony center.

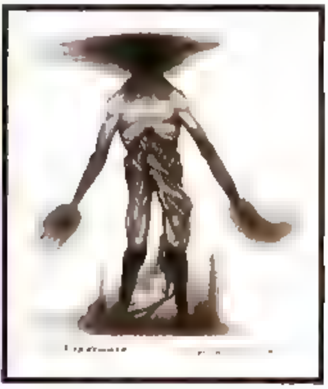
This game has two big things going for it: 1) The design team behind it is largely composed of *Diablo II* veterans, and that should be a good thing; and 2) it's got hell, and that's always a good thing. The only thing missing now is practical proof that Flagship's first release can make a first-person RPG fun to play—and that's what we're hoping to discover at E3, where *Hellgate: London* will be available for hands-on play.

We're looking forward to that, because while Flagship's design pedigree and the near-future, demon-plagued London setting give us tremendous hope, we have some serious questions about this game. If it's not an action-oriented RPG (e.g., the weird modifiable guns in the game are generally "sticky," homing in on a target), then why mandate a locked-in FPS-style viewpoint? If you're aiming to re-create the phat lewt carrot-on-a-stick gameplay that propelled the *Diablo* games to success, then why won't you allow players to see their increasingly cool characters in anything other than a menu screen?

OK, so we're a little fixated on the near-total lack of a third-person view (it does switch up during melee combat), but it implies a somewhat deficient generosity of spirit. Gamers enjoy seeing their developing characters kick ass—or at least they like the choice of whether they get to see that—and if success in the game is going to boil down to dice rolling instead of twitch skills, why not let gamers see something more than their guns' brilliantly colored light beams smack a demon down during that dice roll? *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines* made it work (more or less), and that game did depend on twitch skills for success.

Still, there's a lot to look forward to with *Hellgate*. The engine is beautiful, and if it can really create an endless series of randomly generated dungeons to crawl though, the replayability factor will be enormous. The weird blend of magic and realism, in both items and environments should make for a compelling and surreal game world—we look forward to smiting hellspawn in and around landmarks like Big Ben and the Millennium Dome. Here's hoping all of that implied drama is there in spades when we get our hands on the game at E3.

☒ **Robert Coffey**



SECOND OPINION

[illegible] melee, but [illegible] thing? After all, I didn't get to see much more than my hands [illegible] *Morrowind*. Robert also touched upon the moddable weapons, which I know are nothing new. Hey, I played *Deus Ex* as well... but [illegible] being applied here shows lots of promise. I'm looking forward to making my own übergun and trading online, which leads me to the potential for multiplayer. Safe points where players can interact will be scattered around London, but once you leave these zones, you go back out into your own instanced experience. You get the interaction levels of an MMO, but you're never waiting in line to slaughter Satan. ☒ Darren Gladstone

SPORE

Life or something like it

EA MAXIS SIMULATION TBA

What do you do when you've created the most popular PC game of all time? If you're *Sims* designer Will Wright, you set your sights even higher. His latest project is a game about the past and the future, the evolution of life, and the development of intergalactic civilization. It's a game that pays tribute to Wright's favorite titles while blending their diverse concepts into a single cohesive whole. Entitled *Spore*, it spans the rise of a spacefaring civilization, right from its humble beginnings in the primordial soup.

Spore touches upon a wide array of gameplay concepts as the action evolves alongside the player's creature. "It features a wide variety of game types as a sort of homage to my favorite games," says Wright. Six different gameplay themes have been revealed: tide pool, evolution, tribal, city, civilization, and invasion. Each of these modes draws upon different influences while remaining stylistically consistent with the rest of the game.

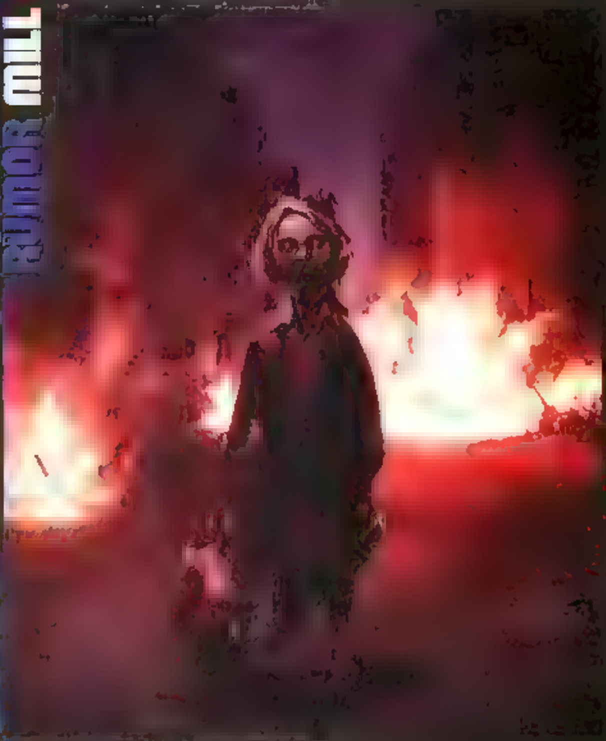
The player's imagination becomes an integral part of his or her game...as well as a part of other players' experiences. *Spore* makes use of online connectivity to share each player's creations with a central database while simultaneously retrieving other players' work to help populate individual game worlds. The game's community is an essential element of the overall experience; though the networked aspect of the title is asynchronous—that is, no simultaneous multiplayer—other gamers will influence each player's experience in many ways. Each player's game environment will feature creatures, structures, vehicles, and ultimately entire worlds created by his or her peers and exchanged seamlessly over the Internet.

Given the popularity of *The Sims* and the impressive level of polish and humor customary in Wright's work, *Spore* has amazing potential to become every bit as huge as its predecessor. Its ambitious design will allow it to take advantage of whatever success it achieves—the more people who play and create, the more variety other users will experience. ☒ Jeremy Parish, from 1UP.com

THE PLAYER'S IMAGINATION BECOMES AN INTEGRAL PART OF HIS OR HER GAME...AS WELL AS A PART OF OTHER PLAYERS' EXPERIENCES

RUMOR MILL

Word on the street



PUBLISHER: HIP GAMES RELEASE: 2006

City of the Dead

OK, so this technically isn't a rumor—we know it's coming, we just don't know when. American McGee and horror icon George Romero are collaborating on what may allegedly be "the goriest game ever made." We just hope everyone involved remembers that gory doesn't automatically equal good—though it never hurts.

PUBLISHER: VU GAMES RELEASE: WE'RE NOT EVEN TOUCHING THIS ONE

Half-Life 2: Aftermath

Rumors have been running rampant of a *Half-Life 2* expansion featuring Alyx as the lead character. And according to Valve, it is in fact *much* more than just a rumor. The developer has remained understandably tight-lipped, but we know the game will focus on the aftermath of City 17's destruction.

PUBLISHER: UBISOFT RELEASE: 2005

Prince of Persia 3

Sure, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* might not have been as profitable as *Warrior Within*, but it had more finesse and a hell of a lot more character. We don't know much about *POP3*, but we hear there are multiple characters, a better balance between puzzles and action, and plenty more time-manipulating tricks. So long as Ubisoft spares us the hack-n-slash-fest that was *Warrior Within*, we're psyched.

PUBLISHER: TBA RELEASE: TBA

Total Annihilation 2

We want a real *TA* sequel...and we don't mean that *Kingdoms* crap that came out a few years ago. All the pieces are in place: a healthy interest level, the willingness of original designer Chris Taylor, and—from what we've pieced together—the publishing support of EA. When we'll actually see something official is anyone's guess.

PUBLISHER: NCSOFT **DEVELOPER:** CRYPTIC STUDIOS **GENRE:** MMORPG **RELEASE DATE:** LATE 2005

CITY OF VILLAINS

With great power come great ass-kicking super-gadgets and nefarious world-exploding schemes. And no, that wasn't a typo—it's effectively the basis behind *City of Villains*, the long-awaited follow-up to *CGW*'s 2004 MMORPG of the Year, *City of Heroes*. At long last, players will finally have the opportunity to get down with their bad selves.

Let's get the basics out of the way: The game will have a slew of all-new costume options—take, for example, the creepy mechanical spider legs we saw on one baddie in the early trailers. There will also be new character archetypes, which at this point look to be evil mirror-image counterparts of the existing templates. Hopefully, the "mastermind" template won't disappoint.

But the feature we're really excited about is the PVP action—so long as it provides a worthwhile experience with both risk and reward. The arena combat in *COH*'s most recent content update gave us a taste of what's to come, but the prospect of full-fledged heroes-versus-villains melee matches is a far bigger deal. How is this system going to be handled? We assume that villain characters won't be able to just stroll through Paragon City unchecked (same goes for hero characters trespassing in the new Fallen Isles area), which would logically rule out a fully consensual PVP experience. Will we be able to lay the smack down when an upstart group of villain characters walks into the city? And, more importantly, will those same characters be able to fall from grace, Hal Jordan style? We've been planning our virtual reign of terror ever since the original game's release—and now, it's clobberin' time. **Ryan Scott**

Why is it that the bad guys always look so much cooler?

TIMESHIFT

Back to the future

[illegible] INTERACTIVE **GENRE:** FPS **RELEASE DATE:** [illegible]

The first time we saw this game, we were instantly impressed. The graphics were jaw-dropping, and the notion of introducing time-shifting features into a first-person shooter was just cool. Break a box, crouch over its busted pieces, and hit Rewind—instant hiding spot! That, plus basing it all in a steampunk-inspired alternate universe, makes for some compelling takes on the vehicles and weaponry that populate the world. Steampunk is a pretty tight niche even amongst the sci-fi crowd, but there hasn't been a good attempt at the subject matter since 2001's *Arcanum*...and this stuff has a lot more potential than the rehashed aliens that are always bent on conquering our dimension.

As *CGW* editor Robert Coffey succinctly put it, "This game looks cool" (he said either that or "I want to bathe in drool"—it's a little hard to understand the guy with his Hannibal Lecter mask strapped on). We were hyped about this game...until we heard who is developing it: Saber Interactive. For those unfamiliar with Saber, it's the developer that excreted *Will Rock*, a game we hated with every fiber of our being. That mindless attempt at a shooter looked great, but its gameplay made little to no sense. But we've come to grips with our loathing. Simply put, the fact that we didn't flee in terror when faced with the thought of Saber's previous efforts is a testament to how much potential there is for *TimeShift*. Darren Gladstone

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2 FRANCHISE PLAYERS

The big-name players are back

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT RELEASE: Q4 2005

Age of Empires III

The staggering success of *Age of Empires II* is a tough act to follow. Rather than acting as yet another carbon copy of its forebear, *AOE3* introduces some new gameplay elements. Take, for example, the home city, which represents your European capital. It gains levels, RPG style, as you win games—which in turn allows you to unlock better units, resources, and buildings imported straight from the homeland. We just hope the gameplay doesn't get too gimmicky, as an RTS is a delicate structure—and *AOE* is one name that we don't want to see disgraced.

PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION RELEASE: TBA 2005

Call of Duty 2

With just about every significant and insignificant engagement from WWII having been re-created multiple times across multiple titles, why is it we are still so dang excited about *Call of Duty 2*? It's not the snazzy graphics (even though the new engine looks fantastic); it's the gameplay—combat will be opened up remarkably, letting gamers truly attack a situation as opposed to plowing through a scripted rail. Don't worry, there will still be big scripted set pieces, but this time you'll have a bigger say in just how they're resolved.

PUBLISHER: UBISOFT RELEASE: FEBRUARY 2006

Heroes of Might and Magic V

And here we thought the *Might and Magic* series was dead and buried. Nival Interactive, creators of the awesome *Silent Storm*, has signed on to breathe new life into the series with *HOMAM5*, which sports six unique factions and over 40 different creatures and spells. If anybody can return this turn-based strategy game to its former glory (combining more RPG elements in the process), Nival can—and we can't wait to see what it has on hand at E3.

66 ROOKIES TO WATCH

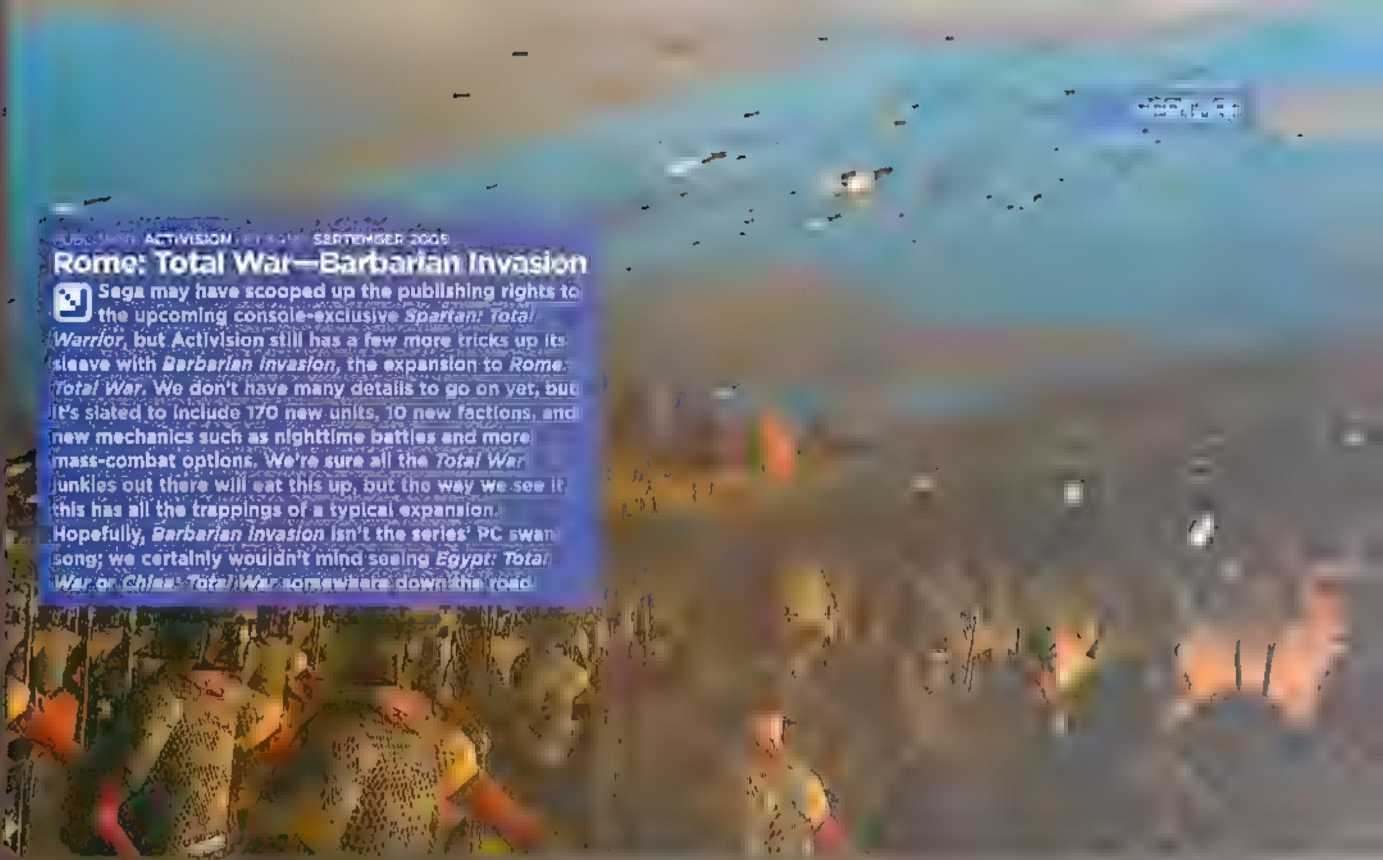
Destined for greatness?

PUBLISHER: FUNCOM RELEASE: 2006

Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

Age of Conan attempts to have its cake and hack it up with a wicked huge ax, too, by delivering both a robust single-player game and an MMO experience in one blood-soaked package. We're looking forward to seeing just how Funcom intends to pull this twofer off.

Out of the box, *Conan* is being designed as a complete single-player action-RPG, with all the brutality and drama you'd expect (translation: expect lots of severed limbs, decapitations, and deliciously messy gouts of blood). The single-player game even has multiple endings. Once finished, you'll have the opportunity to take your champion online and make your barbaric mark in a huge online world. Funcom hopes that by getting players acclimated to the game offline, the MMO experience will be both less daunting and more dynamic and vivid. This baby is quite a ways off, and all we've seen so far are some drop-dead gorgeous screens. We're crossing our fingers—hopefully, Funcom will have much more to show us soon.



PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 2005

Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion

Sega may have scooped up the publishing rights to the upcoming console-exclusive *Spartan: Total Warrior*, but Activision still has a few more tricks up its sleeve with *Barbarian Invasion*, the expansion to *Rome: Total War*. We don't have many details to go on yet, but it's slated to include 170 new units, 10 new factions, and new mechanics such as nighttime battles and more mass-combat options. We're sure all the *Total War* junkies out there will eat this up, but the way we see it, this has all the trappings of a typical expansion. Hopefully, *Barbarian Invasion* isn't the series' PC swan song; we certainly wouldn't mind seeing *Egypt: Total War* or *China: Total War* somewhere down the road.

[illegible] PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS RELEASE: FALL 2005

Star Wars Empire at War

Ah, we wouldn't be geeks [illegible] happens to coincide with the opening [illegible] Wars [illegible] *Star Wars* [illegible] Darth Vader cosplayers [illegible] screaming [illegible] just like you. Given the probable [illegible] for the movie, though, [illegible] much more psyched [illegible] LucasArts' *Empire at War*, [illegible] the time between *Episodes III* and *IV*. [illegible] designed by Petroglyph, a group [illegible] from Westwood [illegible] on the *Command & Conquer* games. [illegible] paced, elegant [illegible] Rebellion and kill all the cute little Ewoks—would you?

[illegible] NCSOFT
Q3 2005

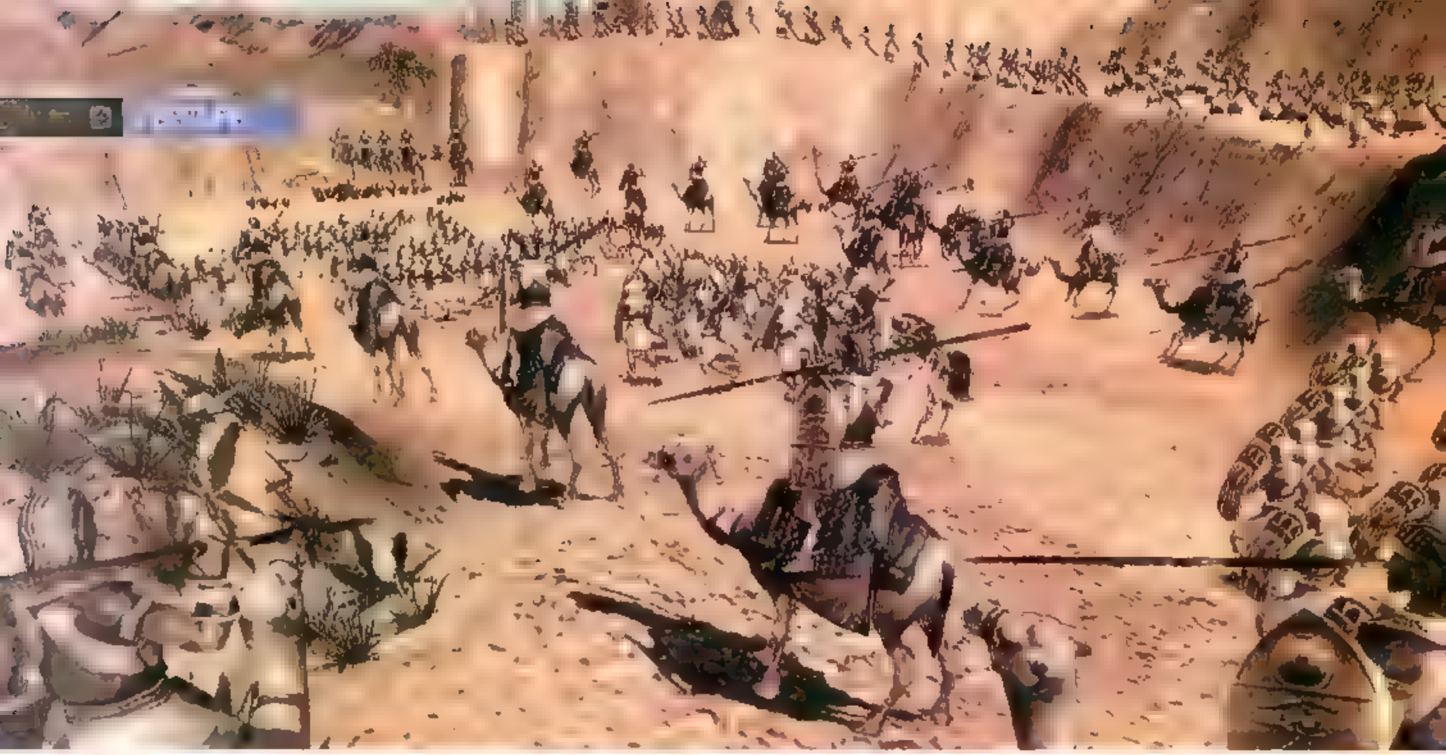
Auto Assault

We've said it before, and we'll say it again: *Auto Assault* is the PC gaming equivalent of *Mad Max*—or, for those old-school enough to remember, an online equivalent of *Autoduel*. The automobile theme is a fresh concept in the MMO world, and one that's likely to appeal to gamers who have grown bored with the genre. But while the execution may be decidedly different, the mission-based gameplay structure should reel in plenty of curious MMO-philes. Our only concerns: RPG fans might be thrown off a bit by the twitch-based action. Meanwhile, with all the vehicle upgrades and weaponry comes a daunting statistics list; it could be too much for action gamers. Hopefully, you won't need a mechanic to figure everything out.

[illegible] MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT
[illegible]

Imperator

From the collective talent behind *Dark Age of Camelot* comes *Imperator*, a tale of Roman history gone totally awry. You'll start the game as a cadet in training, dealing with a Mayan assault on a nearby vacation planet—and you'll soon find yourself embroiled in a far-future power struggle between the Roman and Mayan empires. It's an interesting premise, and it's squarely focused on player-versus-environment gameplay...something that *DAOC* paid scant attention to. Still, if Mythic can demonstrate the same level of commitment to *Imperator*—and maintain the creative potential of the setting—the game could be a serious contender once it's finished.



PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY** DEVELOPER: **STAINLESS STEEL STUDIOS** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **OCTOBER 2005**

RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

Up close and personal

If what the world doesn't need is yet another historical-based RTS à la *Age of Empires*, then don't tell Rick Goodman, former lead designer of the first *AOE* and founder of Stainless Steel Studios, maker of *Empire Earth*. His new game, *Rise & Fall*, scales back from *Empire Earth*'s play-the-entire-history-of-the-world approach in order to provide a tighter focus as you command troops from any of four ancient historical cultures.

But don't let the smaller historical scale fool you into thinking the game design is any less ambitious. In fact, it features at least one innovation that could provide a serious breakthrough in RTS design: Along with the typical top-down micromanagement, you can also play in third-person mode for short bursts of time, jumping into the shoes of specific heroic units such as Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, and Julius Caesar. This isn't the first time a third-person mode has been tried, but it could be the first time it significantly affects gameplay. Hero units have special abilities that you can call on during particularly brutal spots, and their very presence may give nearby troops morale boosts or other stat increases.

The game's graphics engine looks quite spectacular, allowing you to zoom in on massive armies in glorious 3D. And as good as all the game engines we're seeing these days are, *Rise & Fall*'s still stands out for its incredible richness—during our demo, it was seriously hard to believe at times that we weren't watching a cut-scene as wall sieges and naval battles played out in startling detail.

We like that Stainless Steel has narrowed the historical timeline for *Rise & Fall*, and we honestly look forward to this one more than *Empire Earth*—which has always been a bit much for us, despite the obvious quality. There will be "sexier," higher-profile titles at E3 this year, but *Rise & Fall* is the kind of deep, rich strategy game that PC gamers live for. Even if 50 Cent isn't doing the soundtrack ☒ **Jeff Green**

SWITCH HITTERS

Console crossovers

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **FALL 2005**

Fable: The Lost Chapters

Peter Molyneux's highly anticipated Xbox RPG was released to mixed reviews late last year, and now the infamous game designer is spinning a special edition of his tale for the PC. With all the freedom of choice and nigh-unlimited gameplay of its console cousin, plus additional areas and storyline elements, *The Lost Chapters* is a tantalizing treat—provided it ships when promised.

PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY** RELEASE: **Q4 2005**

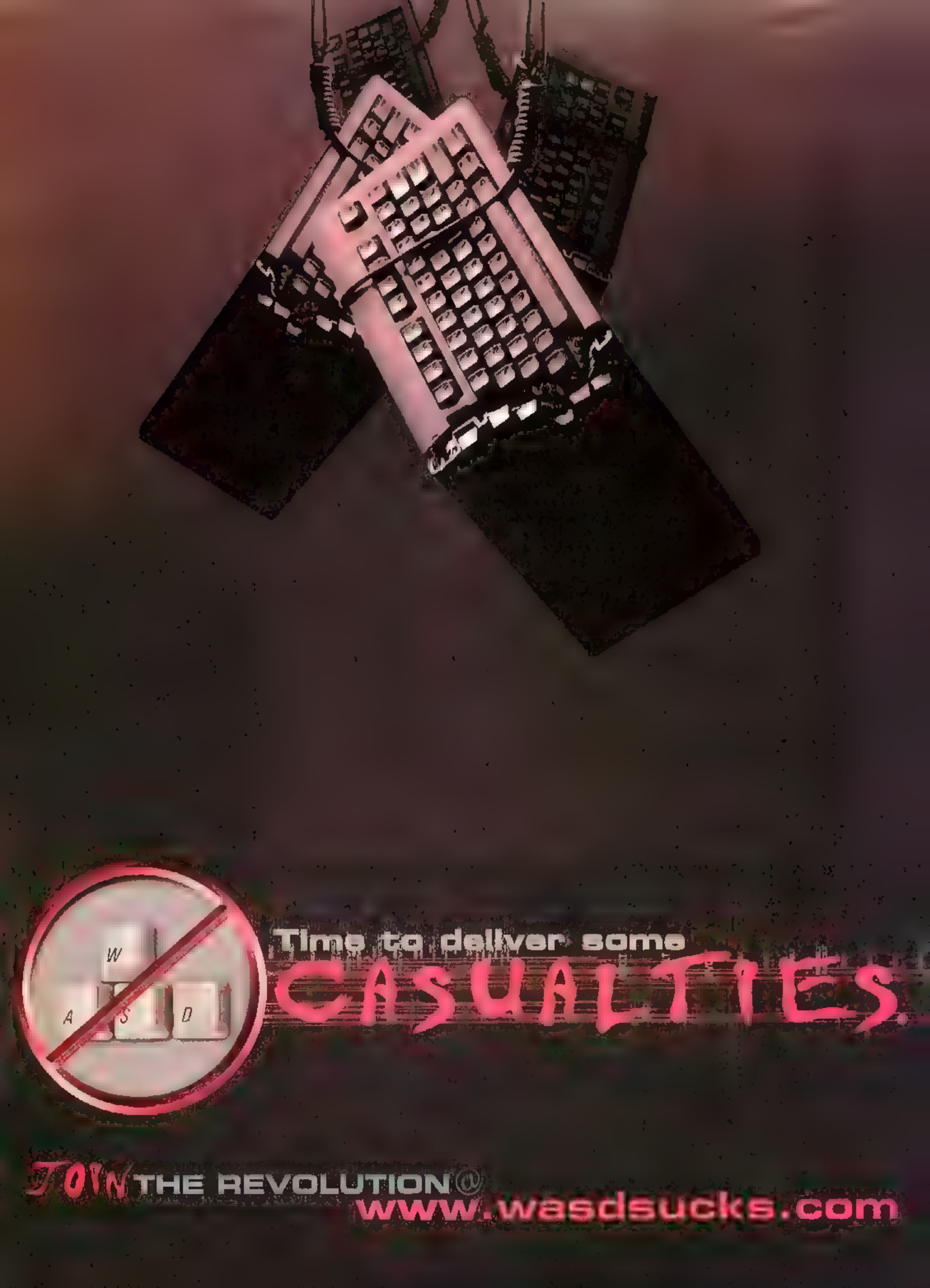
Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

Josh "*Planescape: Torment*" Sawyer and John "*Daikatana*" Romero both agree that red warrior still "needs food badly." The leads of this new *Gauntlet* game promise lots of hack-n-slash action, deep RPG elements, and an online co-op mode. Our advice: Don't overcomplicate things. We'd hate to see this classic franchise stripped of the simple charm that made the original so memorable.

PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** RELEASE: **JUNE 2005**

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

If you're a die-hard *GTA* fan, you've probably already played through the PS2 version of this game. But for those who have been waiting patiently, the PC version of this epic, three-city *Boyz n the Hood*–inspired gangster tale sports sharp hi-res visuals, a fully customizable radio station (complete with fake ads), and player mod support. Word!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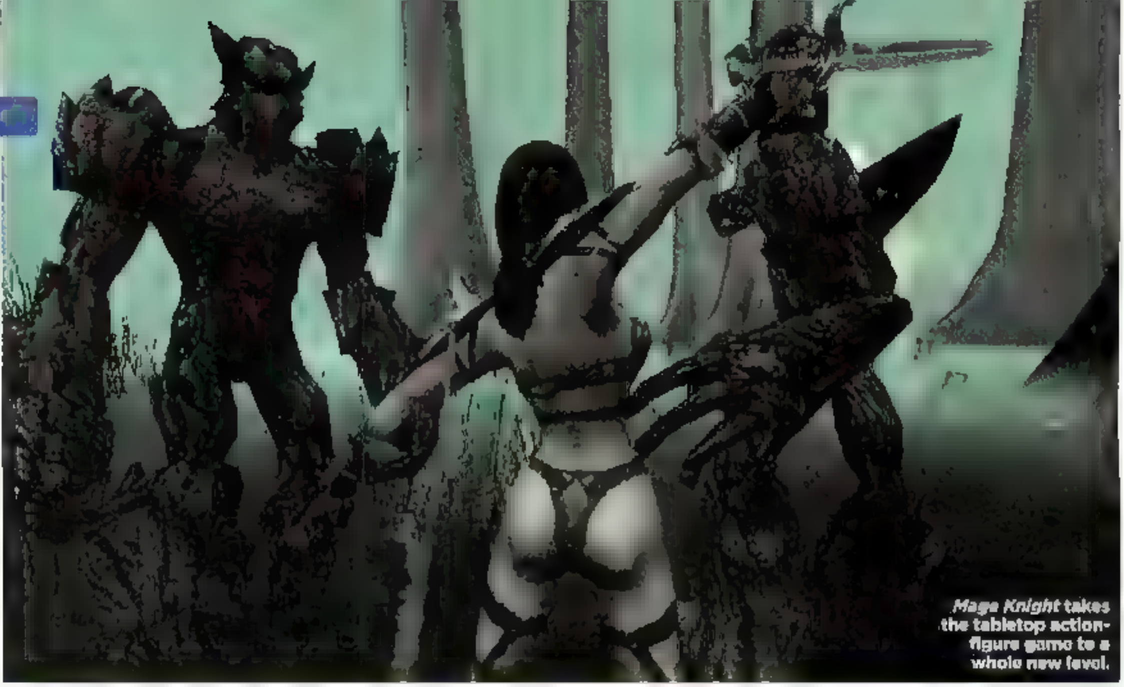
MAGE KNIGHT: APOCALYPSE

Steampunk fantasy



Mage Knight takes the tabletop action-figure game to a whole new level.

PUBLISHER: **NAMCO** DEVELOPER: **ISGAMES** GENRE: **ACTION-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **FALL 2005**

Action-RPG developers always start by saying, "This game's like *Diablo II*, but...." So you can imagine how jaded we were when we got the initial call about *Mage Knight: Apocalypse*.

Never heard of *Mage Knight*? It's a rich fantasy universe, rooted in tabletop gaming and populated with steampunk-savvy dwarves, magic-wielding Atlanteans, dragon men...you get the idea. Namco promises the game will have a deep single-player story that puts you in the shoes of five different heroes. We really like the option of playing the game as a dragon mage or a vampiress—it's something new and different, as opposed to playing as the same boring elves and gnomes we see in most fantasy games. Besides the new options and slick graphics witnessed here, there are some other tempting reasons to try *Mage Knight*.

Developer Isgames is putting a lot more emphasis on action and is leaving all the stat juggling in the background. First big shocker: no levels. Instead, you gain experience by performing actions in the world. Let's say you're a spell caster. The more you cast over time, the quicker you recharge mana, and the more intelligent you get. That, in turn, lets you learn new skills from an instructor. But if you don't get physical and swing the occasional sword or take a punch, you'll never toughen up (i.e., accumulate more health and stamina).

The other big push is multiplayer. While it's still very tentative, insiders told us of plans to establish a Battle.net-like server system. Imagine co-op play through the campaign and possibly even 5-on-5 team deathmatches. What we're also digging is the way players are encouraged to team up for cooperative combo moves. Your team's big bruiser, for instance, can launch a dwarf into battle with a fastball special. That's gotta hurt! **Darren Gladstone**

MAGE KNIGHT: APOCALYPSE

Five

60 to 70 unique skills per class.

Blends classic fantasy fare with steampunk and magic tech. It's based on the tabletop game.

You don't gain levels, per se. The more you use specific abilities, the more they develop.

A huge focus on multiplayer—there's a co-op campaign, plus possible 5-on-5 deathmatches.

Nope!

DELAY OF GAME

Now appearing at their 573rd consecutive E3...

PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION/EA** RELEASE: **LATE 2005**

The Movies/Black & White 2

Should we rename this category the Peter Molyneux Award? He's responsible for two eagerly awaited games that still remain in limbo. *The Movies* could be interesting, although we aren't completely sold on the "make your own movie" premise. Meanwhile, *Black & White 2* needs to be a whole lot better than the original *B&W* (yeah, don't get us started on how we scored it). Molyneux swears that both games—and the PC version of *Fable*—are on their way to us this fall. We want to believe. We really do. But how many times have we heard this before?

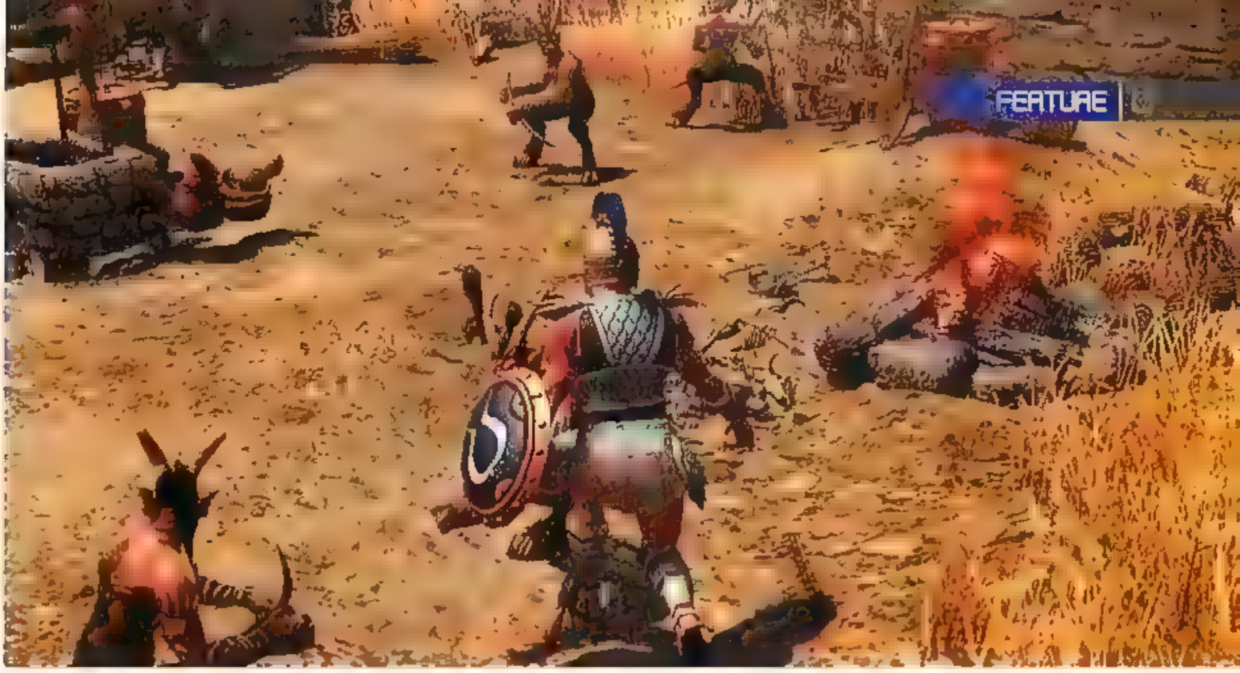
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** **TBA 2005**

Ghost Recon 2

OK, Ubisoft, you've had your fun. You've turned our beloved *Ghost Recon* into a third-person shooter. You've shipped it for both Xbox and PS2. Now we're hearing talk of *Ghost Recon 3*, yet there's still no sign of *Ghost Recon 2* for the PC. What the hell is going on here?

TITAN QUEST

Diablo, meet Zeus



PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **IRON LORE ENTERTAINMENT** GENRE: **ACTION-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **2006**

CATEGORY	TITAN QUEST
Number of Classes	Six "skill masteries"
Number of Skills	"A lot." You can continue to modify and improve your skills as you get stronger.
Story Material	Classic mythology from Egypt and Greece.
XP/Leveling	Earn skill points, which can be used to tailor abilities to your tastes.
Multiplayer	They're not talking about it...yet.
World Editor	Yep, and it promises to be easy.

"Epic adventure in the ancient world."

That's the tagline for *Titan Quest*, the first game from *Age of Empires* designer Brian Sullivan's Massachusetts-based design house, Iron Lore Entertainment. After attending the game's top-secret unveiling, we'd say it's pretty much right on the mark. *Titan Quest* is a *Diablo*-style action-RPG that's set against the backdrops of ancient Greece and Egypt, where you'll face Hydras, Medusae, and other famed creatures from classical mythology.

Apart from the gameplay particulars, the first thing that stood out when we sat down with the game was its graphical detail. *Titan Quest* is an extraordinarily nice-looking game filled with intricate environmental details. Carefully crafted Egyptian buildings cast long shadows over a sun-drenched desert bazaar, while chipmunks and butterflies dart through the swaying grass and flower patches on more fertile lands. Trust us when we say the screens don't do it justice—this game looks amazing.

Iron Lore is also doing some interesting things regarding character development. Instead of sticking to a cut-and-dried class system, the gameplay utilizes skill points that let you continually customize your abilities. For instance, that first-level fireball will continue to grow with you as you add various effects and damage types to it. This should lead to more organic character growth and lots of replay value.

Titan Quest will also include a world editor, which Sullivan calls "the most powerful, flexible, and easy-to-use editor out there." Again, we were impressed by just how easy it was to operate—once you know your way around it, you can achieve a staggering level of detail. But where will your custom-generated content come into play? "We aren't ready to talk about multiplayer yet," Sullivan grins. Fair enough, Brian—but when you're ready to talk, we'll be right here waiting. ⊠ **Ryan Scott**

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **AUGUST 2005**

Dungeon Siege II

We think that there is a good deal of potential here: the skill trees, the intelligent use of pets, and—with any luck—better, nonautomated combat system. Word has it the game is on track for a late 2005 release, which will make those of us who enjoy hacking and slashing very happy.

PUBLISHER: **THQ** RELEASE: **TBA 2005**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

This year marks *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s second E3 appearance. At this point, the game seems to have a longer half-life than Chernobyl. It was supposed to be ready last summer...then it got pushed to the fall. Now we haven't got a clue when it will hit shelves—and it looks like all we'll be seeing at E3 is a video clip.

If *Oblivion's* graphical quality is any indication of things to come, we're in for another big treat.

PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES** DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **TBA 2005**

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

The next three years of your life have arrived!

Let's see...if you started playing *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* when it was released back in 2002, then you might be getting pretty close to finishing it. Lucky for you, the next installment is imminent—well, as imminent as anything in the gigantic, never-ending *Elder Scrolls* universe ever is.

The Elder Scrolls series finally lived up to its promise with *Morrowind*, creating a sweeping, intricately crafted game world ripe for exploration instead of the sprawling but unfocused morass of the earlier games. So what can we expect from the fourth installment? The requisite incredible graphics and an even more focused gaming experience. For example, developer Bethesda is working to create individual audio for every NPC in the game—a far cry from the frequently generic dialogue and look of most *Morrowind* NPCs. The combat system is also being reworked to be more user-friendly, dynamic, and flexible. This is one of the few weaknesses in the last game, and if Bethesda can make fighting not only more interesting but also more rewarding for stealth and magic players as well as swordsmen, *Oblivion* might be another classic RPG. ◼ **Robert Coffey**

SECOND OPINION

I'll spare you excessive jokes about the "massively single-player" experience that is *The Elder Scrolls*, but there are glimmers of promise beyond the purty graphics. There are going to be fewer side quests—and they will be deeper, meaning you'll have far-reaching story threads and multiple ways to solve them. Plenty of random events will still happen in the world, of course. Also, Bethesda, I hear you're rebalancing the skill system. Get to it! You nerfed magic last time! And I'm looking forward to seeing the redone stealth system that borrows a few notes from the *Thief* games. ◼ Darren Gladstone

PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **SEGA** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **SUMMER 2005**

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE: BLUE BURST

Finally, *Phantasy*!

Lv200
Lv200
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***Phantasy Star* coming to the PC? It's about phreakin' time! In the console world, this series pioneered some very cool ideas for traditional RPGs and MMOs. Hub worlds (space stations) let you run around between missions, buy gear, and meet people. When you partner up with other players and head down to the planet's surface, the game creates an instanced world for you. Once in the action, you never have to wait in line to kill Big Monster No. 5. That whole notion is nothing new to PC gamers, so the real question is how the game will stack up against titles like *Guild Wars*.**

The good news is that all the imaginative classes from the console titles are making the jump to the PC, so you'll see a lot more than the typical warriors and mages. There's also virtually no learning curve here; basically, anyone who can deal with the animelike characters will have no problem diving right in. And if you've never dabbled in the series before, there's a lot of meat ready for you to dig into. You've got *Episode I & II* from the console version revamped and updated for the PC. Then there's the brand-new and PC-exclusive *Episode IV*. And if you dig *Blue Burst* (which you can check out for free on this month's demo disc), you should also be psyched for *Phantasy Star Universe*, which is also in the pipeline. Like *Final Fantasy XI*, it will connect PC and next-gen console gamers for a seamless shared world experience. ◼ Darren Gladstone

MAKE OR BREAK

Everything to gain, and everything to lose

PUBLISHER: TURBINE **RELEASE:** LATE 2005

D&D Online/Middle-earth Online

Turbine has been busy lately. For one, the *Asheron's Call* developer has been hard at work on *D&D Online*, an upcoming MMO based on the granddaddy of pencil-and-paper RPGs. It makes liberal use of *D&D's* up-and-coming Eberron campaign setting and aims to faithfully re-create the d20 game mechanics pioneered by *D&D* publisher Wizards of the Coast. The gameplay itself revolves around the same "supermodule" style of mission-based adventuring as its tabletop cousin. Turbine also recently acquired the full rights to *Middle-earth Online*, and we're told some big announcements are in the works, including a possible title change. Despite all the energy Turbine is devoting to these properties, we have one burning question: Does anyone really care? These franchises may be at the top of the fantasy literature heap, but it's gonna be tough to differentiate them from—well, every other MMO out there. You might even say *D&D Online* came out six years ago...it was just called *EverQuest*.

PUBLISHER: FUNCOM **RELEASE:** FALL 2005

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey

We love *The Longest Journey*, but the sequel has us worried. First, the developer has truncated the playing time from some 40 hours to a mere 15 in the hopes that more people will finish it. That might make sense for an Xbox game, but PC adventurers want the full-scale experience. What won't they like? Probably the hand-to-hand combat action...which is the second questionable alteration/perversion being made. Here's hoping this award-winning series isn't being bastardized into irrelevancy.

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT **RELEASE:** TBA 2005

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

This game sure looked pretty last year—but we need more to go on than a high-fantasy *CAD* program. We need to see for ourselves what makes *Vanguard* different from everything else out there. The development team at Sigil (former *EverQuest* leads) firmly believes that gamers are interested in crafting and working together in huge communities. Hey, we're all for making friends...but going online for the sake of doing virtual work?

PUBLISHER: TBA **RELEASE:** 2006

The Witcher

It's rare to see a truly breathtaking game from a fledgling European developer, but *The Witcher* is just that. And Poland-based CD Projekt Red is serious about making this dark, violent RPG something special—so serious that it's working closely with BioWare on the project, having licensed the *Neverwinter Nights* Aurora engine. The real trick now is to find a publisher...something *The Witcher* has lacked for almost three straight E3s. Let's hope we hear some good news soon.

PUBLISHER: EIDOS **RELEASE:** LATE 2005

Tomb Raider: Legend

Can *Project: Snowblind* developer Crystal Dynamics clean up the monumental mess that Core Design made of *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness*? The new-and-improved Lara Croft says it all:

FACE: Keen eyes and ears—great for solving many of the more action-oriented situational puzzles you're bound to run into.

CHEST: A softer, prettier, more anatomically correct Lara Croft (now with full rendering and Havok physics!) for a new generation of obsessive teenagers.

BELT: No more "infinite backpack"—Lara now sports all the junk you pick up!

LEGS: Strong legs for more pulse-pounding run-and-jump action—no more of that *Angel of Darkness* wannabe stealth crap. And she could probably kick your teeth in with them, too!

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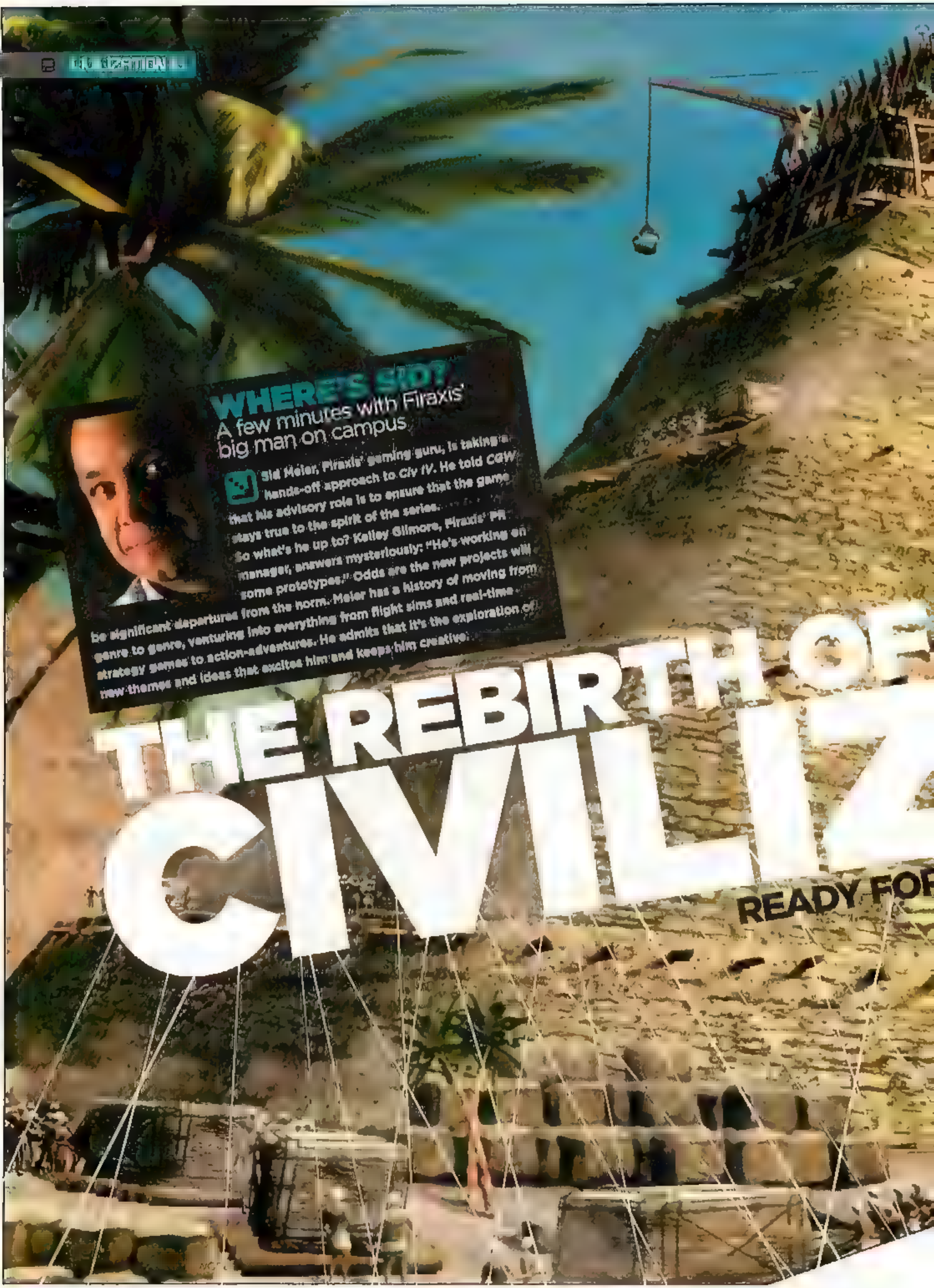


WHERE'S SID?

A few minutes with Firaxis' big man on campus

Sid Meier, Firaxis' gaming guru, is taking a hands-off approach to *Civ IV*. He told *CGW* that his advisory role is to ensure that the game stays true to the spirit of the series. So what's he up to? Kelley Gilmore, Firaxis' PR manager, answers mysteriously: "He's working on some prototypes." Odds are the new projects will be significant departures from the norm. Meier has a history of moving from genre to genre, venturing into everything from flight sims and real-time strategy games to action-adventures. He admits that it's the exploration of new themes and ideas that excites him and keeps him creative.

THE REBIRTH OF CIVILIZ

READY FOR

PUBLISHER: **2K Games**
DEVELOPER: **Firaxis**
GENRE: **Strategy**

ATION

THE WORLD? THEN GET THE SCOOP ON CIV IV

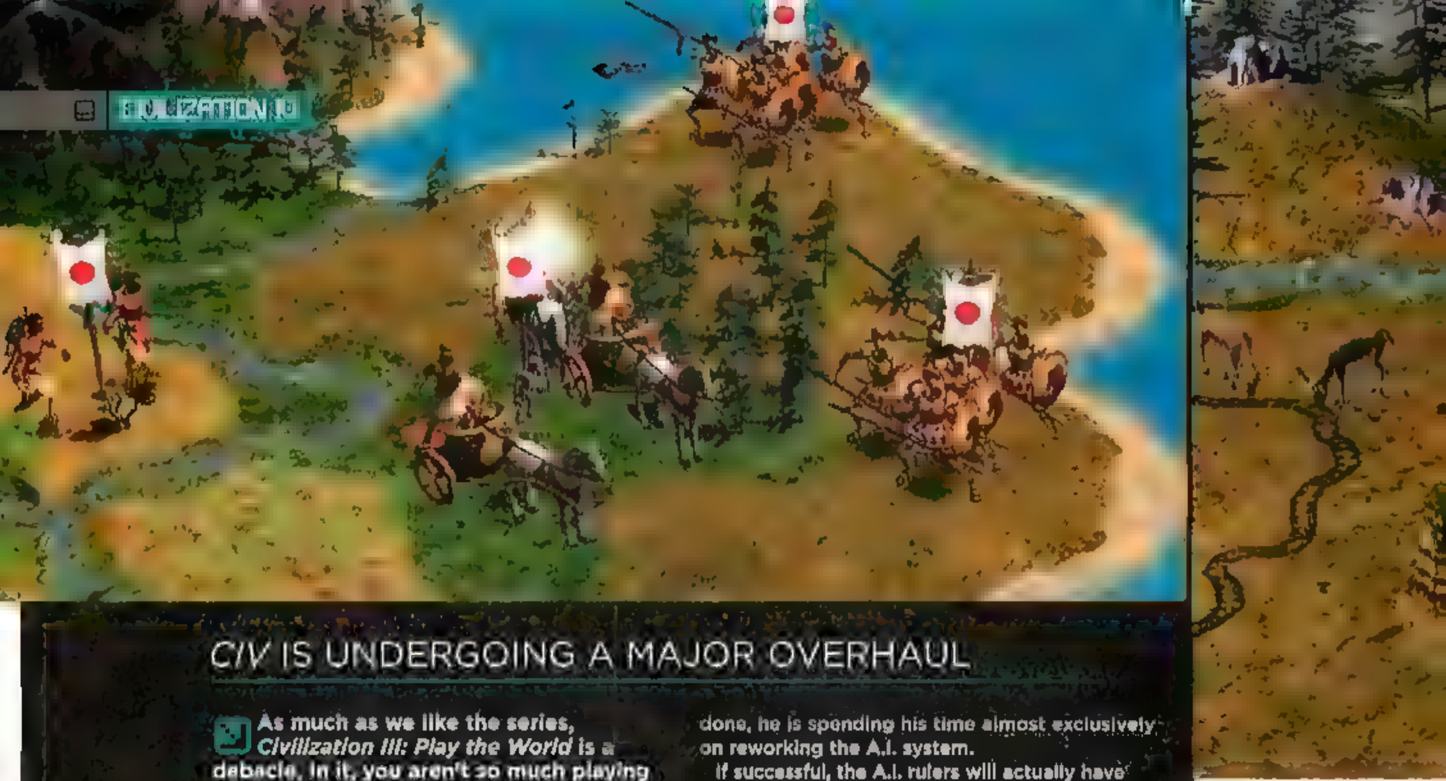
BY DI LUO

The *Civilization* series has been destroying marriages and bringing down GPAs for over a decade. Come this winter, *Civilization IV* will be ready for megalomaniacs everywhere. *CGW*, of course, is the first to give you an exclusive detailed peek at the game straight from Firaxis' Hunt Valley, MD, headquarters.

A STRONG FOUNDATION

Soren Johnson, a designer on *Civ IV*, believes that *Civilization*'s basic formula remains very engaging and that Firaxis still has some very good ideas to bring to the series. "But," he jokes, "maybe we'll run out [of ideas] by *Civ VIII*." His goal is to preserve what has made the series great and build upon that or, as he puts it, implement "one-third proven, one-third improved, and one-third new" material into the new game. Though there will be many improvements and additions, *Civ IV* will retain all the core elements that have distinguished the franchise.

In the previous games, these core elements let you lead your people to glory through a combination of exploration, diplomacy, scientific research, and military conquest. And since the games encompass the entirety of human history, you can start with the dawn of human civilization and usher in the space age—all in the confines of a single game. In addition to its addictive "just one more turn" experience, the *Civilization* series has set itself apart from countless imitators with its open-ended nature. So how is Firaxis going to top itself? ■



GETTING UP TO CODE

CIV IS UNDERGOING A MAJOR OVERHAUL

As much as we like the series, ***Civilization III: Play the World*** **is a debacle. In it, you aren't so much playing the world as you are messing with flaky multiplayer half the time. Let's mark off what really needs work here in order for** ***Civilization IV*** **to pass our inspection.**

TO-DO: GET MULTIPLAYER RIGHT

Firaxis swears it will build *Civ IV* from the ground up with proper LAN and Internet play in mind. According to producer Jesse Smith, Firaxis has already been testing multiplayer games every day for months. This long-overdue addition heralds several key improvements. For one, there will be an RTS-like co-op mode in which several players are on the same team sharing responsibilities. This encourages cooperation as well as specialization—one player can concentrate on the military while others work on science or economics, for example.

Even more important for multiplayer is network code that'll allow you to run a game server. *Civ IV*'s persistent turn-based server allows players to log in and play their turns, at which point it sends out the results to other players. This makes long multiplayer games actually feasible since players won't have to wait around for others to finish their turns.

TO-DO: GET TO THE POINT

The waiting has always been the hardest part of this series—and Firaxis knows it. In fact, Johnson thinks that *Civ III* was probably "a hundred turns too long." To improve this, Firaxis is including three game lengths: a short one for multiplayer games that can be finished in about three hours, a "normal" length game that'll last around 15 to 20 hours, and a monstrously long game for the die-hard fanatics.

TO-DO: NO MORE CHEATING A.I.!

How do you compensate for stupid A.I.? Have the computer cheat like a crooked politician...at least, that's how it's done in previous *Civ* games. Now, every developer claims improved A.I. for its new titles, but Johnson assures us that "improving the A.I. is my greatest concern." With almost all aspects of the game now done, he is spending his time almost exclusively on reworking the A.I. system.

If successful, the A.I. rulers will actually have distinct personalities. Ghengis Khan, for example, will be a warmonger with little diplomatic acumen, while Gandhi will be happy to help the weak. They will also treat each other much like they treat the player, meaning they won't share technologies with each other or gang up on you as they have in the past. Governors who can automatically manage your cities are supposed to be smarter as well. Considering past experiences with the series, our biggest concern will continue to be with the A.I., but we remain optimistic about the final game.

TO-DO: POLISH URBAN PLANNING

Terrain improvement used to be limited to the implementation of forts, roads, irrigation systems, and mines, making it one of the dullest parts of the game. Resources in *Civ IV* will all feature distinct improvements, and the A.I. for automation will supposedly be improved and thus won't run your cities into the ground. Among other improvements, the new flexible tech tree allows for more unique civilization development, and Johnson mentions a new building-maintenance scheme that encourages more peaceful strategies. Also, unlike in real life, there is no more corruption for cities. And for players who really want a different experience, the developers are building the game with the mod community in mind by providing a map editor that supports Python and XML.

TO-DO: SIMPLIFY COMBAT

Firaxis has reworked combat to be more context sensitive. Units no longer have differing attack or defensive strengths. Instead, they will have a single strength with modifiers for certain situations. Infantry, for example, might have bonuses defending rough terrain, while cavalry will be much stronger when attacking archers. Siege and artillery units are stronger and can damage everything in a large stack. Firaxis hopes that these adjustments will encourage players to use combined arms in combat rather than just forming stacks of the strongest unit, a tactic often seen in previous titles.

1 A 3D game map looks a whole lot better; plus, you get a lot more information without having to dig through menus.

SIGHT**SEEING**

A WALKING TOUR OF ALL THAT'S NEW IN *CIV IV*

***Civilization* may be a good game, but the series is showing its age.**

1 The reason Firaxis decided to make the switch to 3D goes beyond the desire to create eye candy. In previous games, players had to examine each city individually to get information since the engine could not accommodate all the details. Now in 3D, the game map becomes a living world where all of a city's information—from its buildings to its workforce—can be easily seen. The interface will also be completely revamped to the standards of modern RTS games: no more annoying layers of menus to deal with. Left-click selects, right-click moves, and lots of helpful pop-ups guide the way.

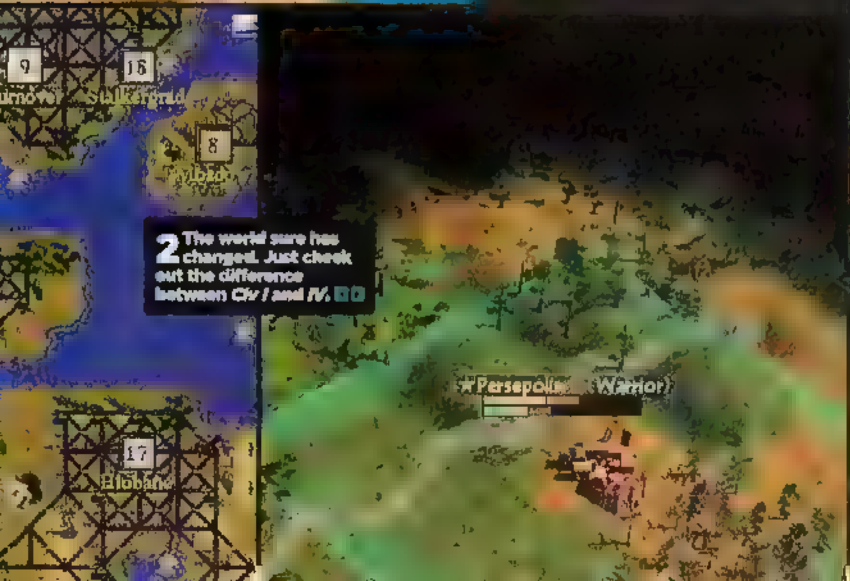
2 See what a graphical coat of paint can do? In an era when even puzzle games often claim to be 3D, the *Civilization* series had been valiantly resisting the trend. "Unfortunately, there's only so much detail you can squeeze into 50 pixels," bemoans Smith. Some of the series' die-hard fans play nothing except *Civ* and probably haven't upgraded their computers in years, but Firaxis believes that some change is necessary.

3 Putting the "civil" in *Civilization*, your combat units will finally have more personality. Unlike in previous incarnations, Firaxis is paying more attention to *Civ IV*'s player customization thanks to a few RPG-like tricks. As combat units increase in experience, they'll level up and gain abilities such as bonuses against certain units, more mobility, and so on. This, along with a smaller overall number of forces, should make the player more attached to his troops and hopefully see them as more than simply fodder. Then there's the major addition of the "great people" of history. These characters take on such roles as artists, prophets, or scientists that can give special bonuses to cities or usher in golden ages.

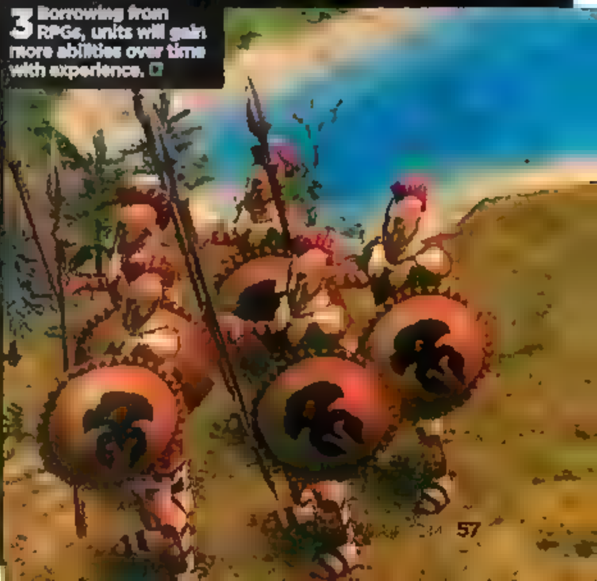
CHURCH & STATE

In *Civ IV* you will now have the chance to steer the course of your people. Instead of only a few government options such as a "republic" or "despotism," there will be "civics" choices that open up with new technologies. Players may, for example, choose to emancipate their slaves, allow the rule of law, or create religious tolerance. These methods of social engineering will make governments distinct from one another and give them both benefits and restrictions.

Religion, which had been taboo in *Civilization* games, finally makes its appearance. Firaxis is careful not to make any value judgments. The seven religions in the game are all generic in ability. The first civilization to reach a certain tech level, say mysticism or monotheism, will start a new religion. By spreading its religion to other empires, a nation can influence a population, gain valuable intelligence, or become friendlier with rulers who hold similar beliefs. See? We *can* all get along.



2 The world sure has changed. Just check out the difference between *Civ I* and *IV*.



3 Borrowing from RPGs, units will gain more abilities over time with experience.

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QUAKE 4 ERUPTS

AFTER 12 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP, **ID** AND **RAVEN** ARE FINALLY MAKING A GAME TOGETHER. **IT'S THE BIGGEST GAME OF THEIR CAREERS.**

BY JEFF GREEN

"The first thing you need to know," says id Software designer Tim Willits as he prepares to show me *Quake 4*, "is that you'll be able to hold a gun and flashlight at the same time."

Though Tim's line—a reference, for those who don't know, to one of the more widespread complaints about id's previous game, *Doom 3*—drew a round of laughter from everyone in the room, it was hard not to feel just a little bit bad for these guys. I mean, I hadn't even asked. Why be so defensive?

The answer is that id, it is clear, has felt the sting of some of the *Doom 3* backlash, the inevitable by-product of years of anticipation and hype that preceded the game's completion. Though *Doom 3* garnered mostly good reviews (including a five-star one from this magazine) and sold a gazillion copies, by year's end the conventional wisdom amongst the hardcore crowd was that it 1) was a bit of a letdown, 2) was overshadowed by *Half-Life 2*, and 3) really should have let you hold a flashlight while carrying a gun, because the game was too dark.

So now, as we sit in a demo room in the offices of Raven Software in Madison, WI, it's imperative, apparently, that I know this one thing about *Quake 4* right away. It feels like an incredibly minor point to me, given the bigger picture that I *am looking at the new* Quake *game*, but the underlying message is understood: id Software does not plan to disappoint you again. ▪

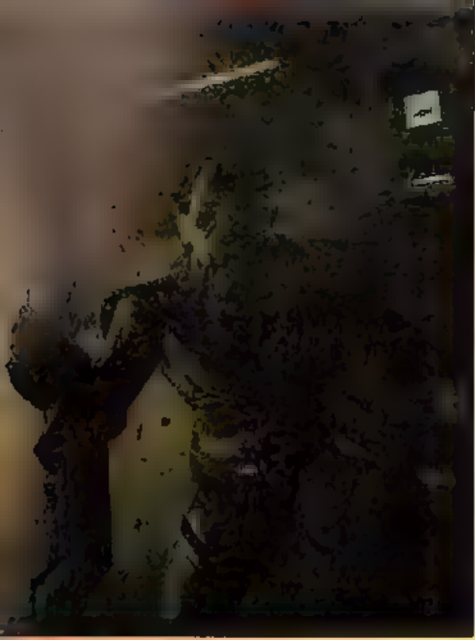
These strogg marines do not want to be your friends. In fact, they want to kill you. Yay!

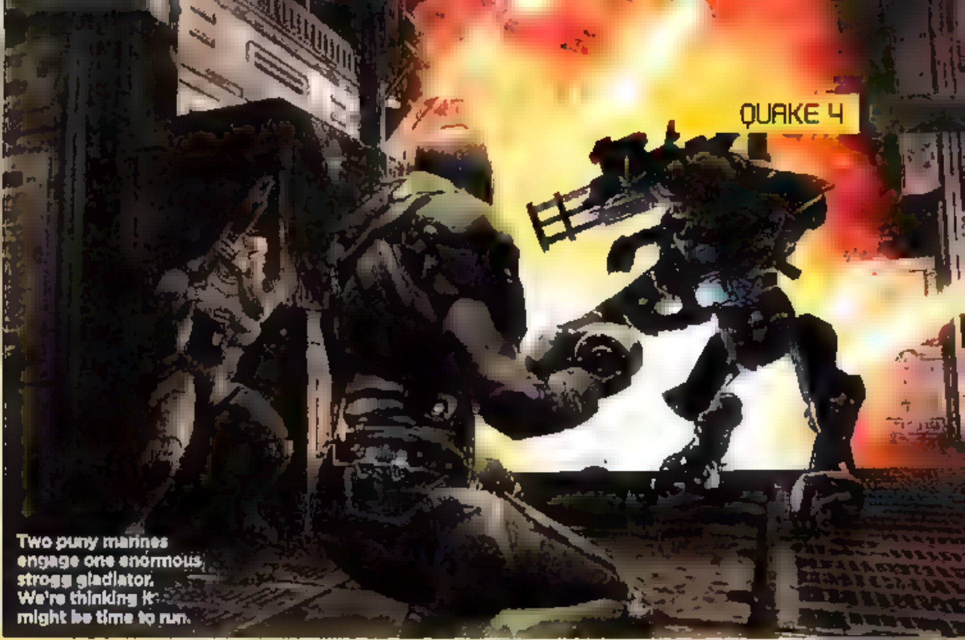
AFTERSHOCK

"Rocket jumping" was invented/discovered accidentally by id programmer John Cash while deathmatching with other id employees during the development of *Quake I*. "We were all playing deathmatch on the Start map," says id designer Tim Willits, "American McGee, John Romero, Shawn Green, John Cash, and myself. American and I had chased John Cash into a corner of a room. He looked at us and said, 'If I'm gonna die, you're gonna die, too.' Then he looked down, fired a rocket—and jumped right over us. So we all went into god mode right then and started jumping."

> **Between *Doom* and *Quake*, id has led the way for virtually every major technological advance in gaming.**

Gladiator wields a pretty energy shield, flanked by strogg tactical transfers.





Two puny marines engage one enormous strogg gladiator. We're thinking it might be time to run.

EARTH-SHATTERING EXPECTATIONS

Is it possible, even given standard game magazine hyperbole, to overstate the importance of id Software and the *Doom* and *Quake* franchises to the gaming industry? The answer, because that was not a rhetorical question, is no. Between these two franchises, id has led the way for virtually every major technological advance in PC gaming (shareware distribution, multiplayer gaming, 3D graphics) for over a decade now. Take away these two franchises and you have to remap the entire landscape of this industry. Though *Doom* tends to garner most of the attention (both positive and negative), it is *Quake* that has probably had the bigger impact—and the folks at id tend to agree.

"Lots of people believe that *Doom* changed computer society," says Willits, "but a lot of us at id feel that *Quake* was more influential. *Quake I* spawned deathmatching [id's John Carmack, legend has it, coined the term], LAN parties, clans, tournaments, major online communities like Blue's News and Shacknews, and the entire 3D graphics revolution."

With *Doom 3* done, id Software is finally returning to the *Quake* series after a long six-year hiatus (the last game, *Quake III Arena*, was released in 1999). And the team is aware that a lot has changed since then. "The games have matured, fans have matured, and people's expectations have matured," says Willits. "*Quake 4* is our response to that."

To answer these expectations, id has taken the unprecedented step of handing over the primary game design to a third-party developer, Raven Software, which is where we're meeting now. Along with Willits and Marty Stratton, id's director of business development, I'm sitting in a large demo room with Raven's cofounder, Brian Raffel; much of Raven's *Quake* team; and some folks from Activision, the game's publisher, there to make sure we behave.

There are also two large boxes of Krispy Kremes, but those remain untouched for now. *Quake 4* is loading, and all eyes are focused on the monitor.

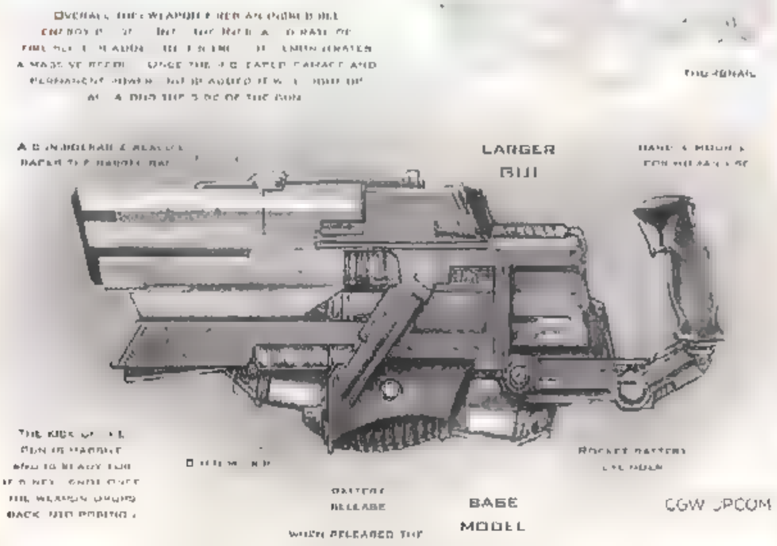
FROM *SHADOWCASTER* AND BEYOND

Calling Raven Software a "third-party developer" does not do the company justice, nor does it even begin to convey the kind of intimate relationship it has had with id for well over a decade. Raven has been working with id and using id's technology exclusively ever since its second game, *ShadowCaster* (1992), which used an interim engine that Carmack was working on between *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*. (That was, in fact, the first time id ever licensed one of its engines.) Since then, Raven has always used id's engines to build its acclaimed library of games, which includes the *Hexen* and *Heretic* series, the *Soldier of Fortune* games, *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, and more.

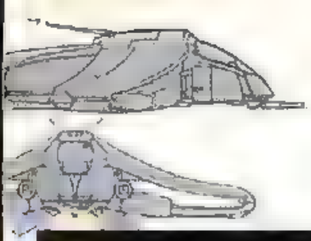
This is, however, the very first time that Raven—or anyone, for that matter—is developing a major title for one of id's signature

WEAPONS

Id and Raven have confirmed that the nailgun and hyperblaster (shown below) will appear in *Quake 4*. To the right is Raven's highly detailed concept drawing of the strogg railgun.



Not the best day in the life of this marine, thanks to this strogg berserker.



franchises. That id would trust Raven Software says a lot about their relationship, but should also come as no surprise.

"Who would you trust more than your best friend to work on one of your babies?" says Willits. "Raven has proven over and over again that they make great titles, they're easy to work with, and we've had a relationship with them that goes back 13 years now." That Raven is the primary developer should not be taken, by the way, as a sign that id is less involved or abdicating responsibility for *Quake 4*. "This is an id game," Willits says plainly. "Obviously, the *Quake* series is very dear to us. But the reality is, it takes much longer to develop games now. We want to stay small at id. We're at 25 people now, and that's the largest we've ever been. For us to keep our franchises alive and doing well and make new games that are fun to play, it's impossible for us to develop them all internally. With Raven using our technology, they can focus completely on cool gameplay and a great story—something they excel at."

Raffel concurs. "We think the combined efforts of id and Raven are going to meet any expectations that fans have. We have a pretty good reputation for telling stories, and we're just going off the world that id created. We're just taking it from there."

All of which raises the question: The story? What story? Isn't this a *Quake* game?

You'll need this mechlike walker to fight some of *Quake 4*'s bigger enemies.

THE FIRST REAL SEQUEL

The shorthand thinking for id's two biggest franchises has long been that *Doom* was the single-player experience and *Quake* was the multiplayer game. id made this official with *Quake III Arena*, which forsook a single-player campaign to focus exclusively on deathmatching. But with *Quake 4*, id and Raven are reestablishing *Quake* as a game for both off- and online play. For the single-player game, the designers decided to make a direct sequel to *Quake II*, picking up the story literally minutes after the end of that game. (This actually makes *Quake 4* the first true "sequel" of the franchise, as *Quake I* and *II* had entirely different story lines.)

"Internally, *Quake II* is our favorite of the series," Willits says. "When we decided to make another *Quake* title, we knew we wanted it to have a strong single-player component. The *Quake II* universe just had a lot of great stuff in it—evil aliens, intergalactic warfare—so we knew we wanted to continue with that."

As *Quake 4* opens, the marine you played in *Quake II* has just assassinated the Makron, the supreme leader of a hostile race of cybernetic creatures called the strogg, who were planning an invasion of Earth. What seemed like a victory in that game, of course, turns out to be premature. What you discover in *Quake 4* is that as soon as one Makron falls, a new one rises up. "You can keep cutting off the heads," says Willits, "but they'll keep growing back. What you need to do is kill the

Quake I can be finished in less than 15 minutes if you don't care about killing everything, you can rocket jump, and you're as insane as the guys who filmed the video located here: www.planetquake.com/qdq/qdqwav.html. You'll need to create a GameSpy account to download it (and download the AVI unless you still have a copy of _Quake_ on your PC), but it's worth it.

A LICENSE TO PRINT MONEY

So, you want to ride around in a fancy car just like id Software's John Carmack, huh? One way to do it is to design game engines that are so good that everyone wants to license them from you.

Here is a list of PC games that have used the Quake series of engines (_Quake_, _Quake II_, _Quake III Arena_) as their underlying technology.

If you include the _Quake_ series and its expansions, this list accounts for $536 million in U.S. sales alone. So get coding!

1996

Quake

Hexen II
Half-Life

1997

Quake II

Anachronox
Daikatana
Half-Life
Half-Life: Counter-Strike
Heretic II
Kingpin
Soldier of Fortune
Sin

1999

Quake III Arena

American McGee's Alice
Call of Duty
Day of Defeat
Heavy Metal: FAKK 2
Medal of Honor: Allied Assault
Return to Castle Wolfenstein
Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory
Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix
Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force
Star Trek: Elite Force II
Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast
Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy

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ECLIPSE

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CYBORG EVO

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- [illegible]

P2600 Rumble Force Pad

- [illegible]

PC GAMERS KEYBOARD AND KEYPAD

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X52 FLIGHT CONTROL SYSTEM

- [illegible]

Saitek

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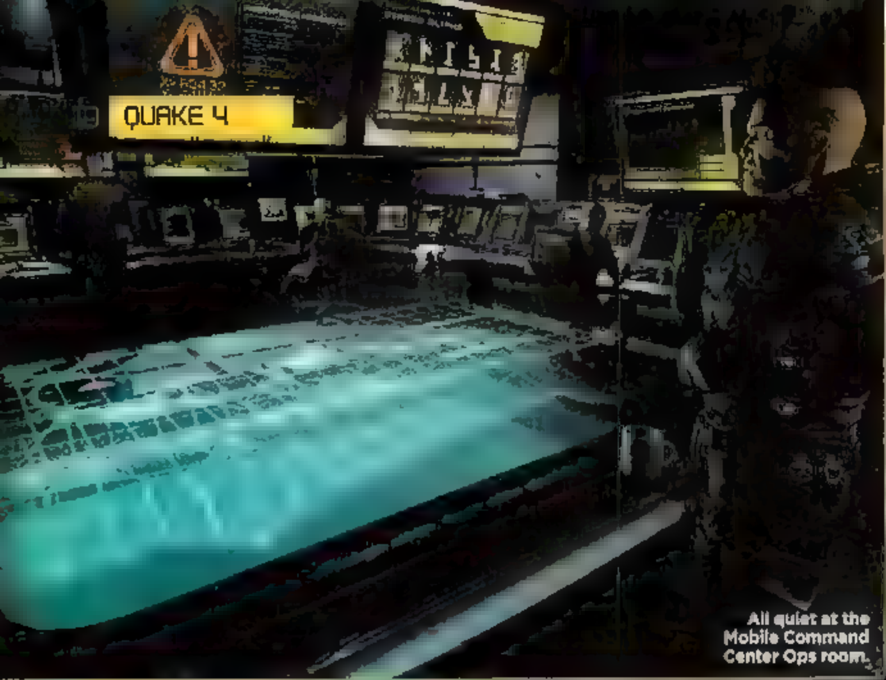


All quiet at the Mobile Command Center Ops room.

AFTERSHOCK

Quake 4 runs on the *Doom 3* engine, which means you need the equivalent of a nuclear power plant in your home to run it. By contrast, the system requirements for the original *Quake* are as follows: Pentium 75MHz processor, 16MB RAM, and 25MB install. No 3D card was required.

Raven can design the best single-player shooter ever, but if *Quake 4*'s deathmatching stinks, no one is going to care, because *Quake* is the quintessential multiplayer game, the granddaddy of all fragfests, the game that taught many of us how to mouselook, frag, rocket jump, and even camp. Raven is designing all-new levels specifically for *Quake 4*'s multiplayer, which will also include a few old favorites from earlier *Quakes* redone in the new engine.

"One thing we definitely want people to know," says id designer Tim Willits, "is that this is not *Doom 3* multiplayer. If anything, it's most like *Quake III* multiplayer. People argue between *QuakeWorld*, *Quake II*, and *Quake III* over which has the best multiplayer, but at id, we feel that *Quake III* is the best. So that's where we're going with this—with even better movement speed and physics—to get the fast, furious twitch precision of *Quake III*."

"Fast" and "furious" are good descriptions of my hour playing on two multiplayer maps, first in a capture-the-flag game and then in a deathmatch. The game had a blistering pace and some large, open outdoor arenas, but there were also some very cool indoor spaces and tight passageways. Unfortunately, at press time, both Raven and id balked at letting us show screenshots, because the maps were essentially works in progress.

> **"Multiplayer *Quake* is about constant carnage all the time. Vehicles would just slow the game down." —Raven lead programmer Jim Hughes**

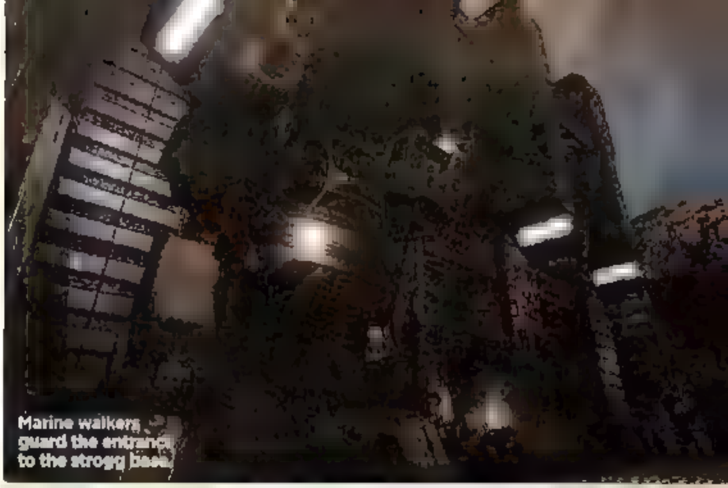
body, kill what makes the whole strogg race tick." And that is called the Nexus, a central intelligence system of the stroggs, not entirely unlike *Star Trek*'s Borg. ("But we don't like the 'b' word," Willits jokes.)

In *Quake 4*, you play a marine named Matthew Kane (the first time Id has named a character in the series), a new member of a military unit known as the Rhino Squad, who is sent down to the planet Stroggos to clean up after the supposed end to the war. Instead, you are immediately shot down and left for dead. When you come to, you are plunged headfirst into a furious firefight with the strogg around the wreckage of your craft.

"We wanted to bring a real war feel to the game," says Raven's lead designer, Jim Hughes. "We wanted you in the thick of battle within five minutes of loading the game."

And indeed you are. I played through the first level of the game, as you make your way into an air defense bunker and hook up with the other survivors of Rhino Squad, and it is a pitched battle all the way. Unlike in *Doom 3*, you will not be spending any time reading journals or listening to audio logs—nor will you be alone for much of the game. It's less about contained horror than about all-out, open warfare.

"*Doom 3* was about you against evil," says Willits. "Here it's Earth against Stroggos."



Marine walkers guard the entrance to the strogg base.

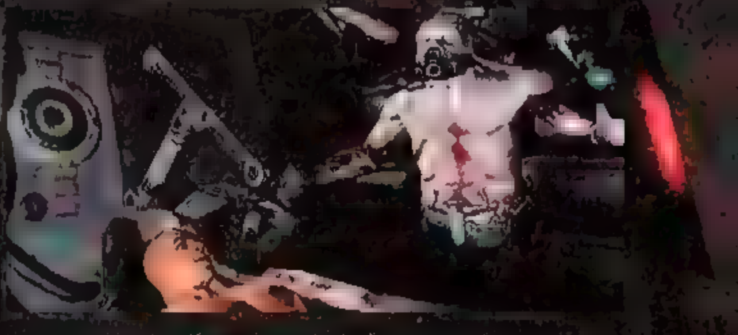
SPOILER ALERT

DON'T READ UNLESS YOU WANT TO KNOW *QUAKE 4*'S BIG TWIST!

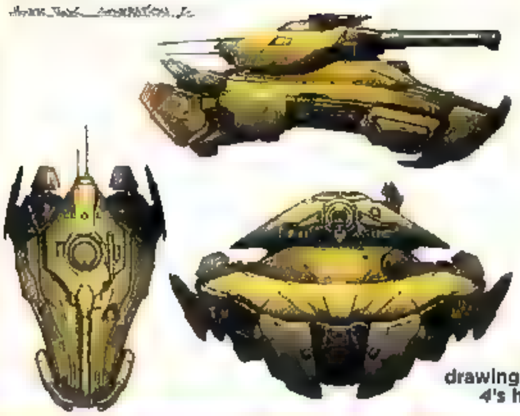
We're warning you: If you like surprises in your PC games, then read no further. Stop now. Because Raven and Id have an awesome twist in store for *Quake 4*, and we're going to blow it for you here. Leave now if you don't want to know.

OK, so here's the deal.

About one-third of the way through, while on an escort mission, your squad is wiped out by the strogg. You are knocked out and taken captive, and awaken in a strogg medical facility. Then it gets really scary. In a surprisingly gruesome cut-scene, you are placed on a conveyer belt with other helpless humans, and as you look ahead, you can see what's in store for you: The strogg are brutally severing body parts from the humans and grafting on alien appendages. As you continue along the belt, you keep thinking you're going to leap off and escape—but it never happens. You watch as your own arms and legs are ripped from your body and you begin to be "stroggified," to use the developer's term. The final part of stroggification is when they link your brain into the strogg's collective nerve center—and it's right before this happens that you finally escape. But you are no longer the same. Now, like Peter Weller in *RoboCop*, you are a not-quite-all-human with deadly new abilities—ironically becoming humanity's best hope for destroying the strogg once and for all.



This strogg [illegible]



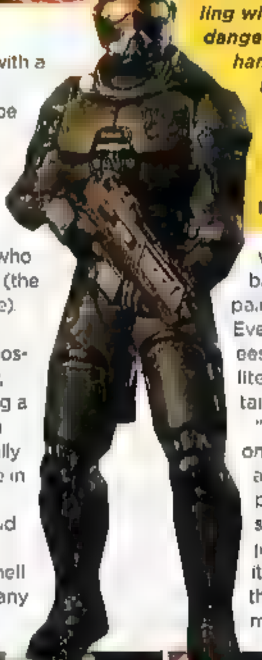
Concept drawings of *Quake 4*'s hovertanks.

Id Software's first public mention of the name *"Quake"* was way back in 1990 on a file that came with its very first PC game, *Commander Keen: Invasion of the Vorticons Trilogy*. On the file previews.ck1 (which you can still find on the version of *Keen* that id sells on its website), is the following text:

"Coming Soon From Id Software

"As our follow-up to the* Commander Keen *trilogy, Id Software is working on* The Fight for Justice: *a completely new approach to fantasy gaming. You start not as a weakling with no food—you start as Quake, the strongest, most dangerous person on the continent. You start off with a hammer of thunderbolts, a ring of regeneration, and a trans-dimensional artifact. Here the fun begins. You fight for justice, a secret organization devoted to vanquishing evil from the land! This is role-playing excitement."

There never was a game called *The Fight for Justice*. Id's next game was a little something called *Doom*.

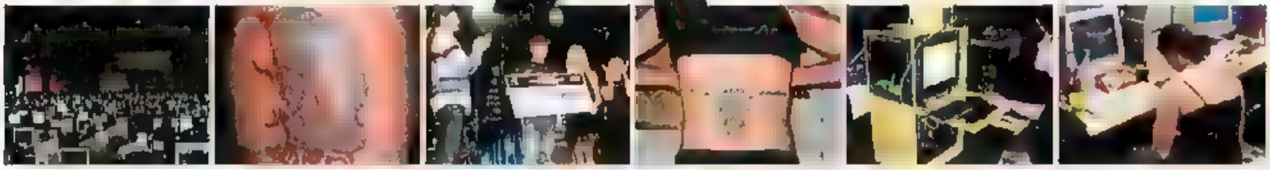


MANUFACTURING A WAR

To fight that war, Raven and Id are providing you with a host of weapons. There is the expected arsenal of guns, of course, though this time most of them can be modified as the game progresses to either improve performance or change effects. For example, you might be able to add an extended clip or a single-shot zoom to the machine gun, or attach a fast autoloader to the shotgun. You're also going to have a squad of teammates fighting alongside you, who may or may not become victims of your friendly fire (the developers were still debating this issue at press time). Squad tactics will be key to surviving in *Quake 4*, as some of the areas I saw would have been nearly impossible without friendly suppressing fire to help. Finally, the game will feature a few vehicles to pilot, including a giant mechlike walker and a heavy hovertank—which you'll need to fight new monsters designed specifically to take them on. (And no, vehicles won't be available in multiplayer. As Hughes said, "Multiplayer *Quake* is about constant carnage all the time—vehicles would just slow the game down.")

The labor involved in getting all of this done is hellishly extensive, and in two days at Raven I saw many of the team of 50 on the game toiling away at a variety of tasks: motion-capturing animations (see sidebar on page 69), recording sounds, tweaking maps, or painstakingly rendering highly detailed character models. Even in this early pre-alpha stage, I'm seeing Raven employees dragging themselves back into the office after working literally all night, though I'm hoping that a visit from a certain magazine editor isn't unduly influencing that.

"As far as Id goes," says Stratton, "or games we've worked on ourselves or with other publishers, this is by far our biggest and most complicated game. There is so much varied gameplay with the vehicles, with all that goes into scenes of squads fighting together, that it's much more complex than just your lone guy and the A.I., as in the earlier *Quakes*, when it comes to scripting. Everything that goes into making sure those eight guys around you are all doing the right thing means a lot more work and a much larger scope.



QUAKECON CELEBRATES 10TH ANNIVERSARY

To many gamers, QuakeCon is the Woodstock of LAN parties. Maybe that's why Id refers to it as "four days of peace, love, and rockets."

It all started back in August of 1996. A small group of die-hard gamers got together for a little weekend fragging at the Best Western hotel in Garland, TX. Now it's grown into an annual event where thousands of *Quake* fans come from all over the world—many with high-end PCs in tow—to meet up with (and frag) people they've been playing long-distance. There are even corporate sponsorships and big prize money contests these days. Yet it is still a free event, open to anyone who registers at www.quakecon.org. This year's QuakeCon, the big 10-year anniversary, takes place August 11-14 at the Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, TX.

By the time you read this, the big tournaments may be full or getting full, but it's not too late to register. For those unable or unwilling to brave the wilds of Texas, there will also be interviews, photos, and live Internet radio broadcasts of the tournament action from the QuakeCon website.

Oh, and if you think you're a hardcore *Quake* fan, perhaps you should come back to us when you're ready to permanently adorn your body with that love, as the folks pictured above have. Thanks to Id Software's CEO Todd Hollenshead for supplying us with the photos.

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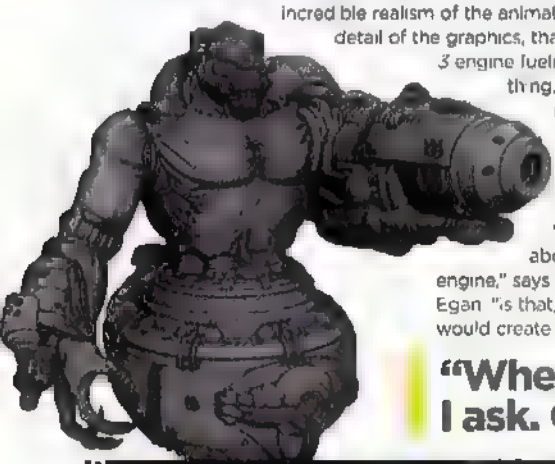
I get a further example of this scope a little bit later in the game, when the designers show me another level in which I must join my squadmates on a convoy carrying an electromagnetic bomb to a sublevel of a building, where it will be used to overload a device called the "tetranode," which will cut off the strogg forces from the Nexus. The cut-scene preceding this mission, the scripting that follows, the incredible realism of the animation, and the rich detail of the graphics, thanks to the *Doom 3* engine fueling the whole thing, are light-years more sophisticated than anything seen in a *Quake* game before.



"What's great about the *Doom 3* engine," says lead artist Tom Egan, "is that, in the past, you would create some cool, detailed concept art for a monster, for example, but in the actual game it would end up being low-polygonal and kind of crappy looking. Now the model you can create is exactly what you envisioned in your head." Along with bringing back some *Quake II* monsters, like the gunner, gladiator, and berserker, Raven had fairly free reign to create new characters, pending id's approval, but as with everything in *Quake 4*, the labor involved is somewhat unreal. After a piece of concept art is approved, the process of actually turning even one sketch into an animated 3D creature in the game will take months of time and the efforts of around a half-dozen people, from modelers to 2D artists to painters to programmers.

Fortunately, the years of previous collaboration between id and Raven have made that process less painful than it could be. "After working with Raven," says Stratton, "I would honestly say they are better than us at id when it comes to concepting stuff this detailed and accurate. It's enormously helpful in the process of working together and getting this game done."

WHAT, US WORRY?

The question of mine that draws the biggest laughs, and the

> **"When are you guys going to be done?" I ask. Oh yeah. I forgot. This is id.**

RAVEN AND ID'S FIRST DATE

The folks at Raven Software and Id Software first hooked up way back in 1992, in Madison, WI, soon after Raven opened its doors and began working on its first game, *Black Crypt*.

The original id team had recently moved up north from Louisiana, because, according to id designer Tim Willits, id cofounder Tom Hall, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, "told the guys that Madison was a great town with beautiful women everywhere."

While working on *Black Crypt*, Raven cofounders Brian and Steve Raffel put an ad in a local paper advertising for a PC programmer. John Romero and Tom Hall, located about half a mile away, came to check Raven out, just because they were the only other local game developers. As Brian Raffel recalls, "We were doing *Black Crypt* for EA, while they were doing something called shareware. We felt kind of bad for them, because we were thinking, 'Shareware? They can't get their own game published?' We didn't realize, of course, that they were light-years ahead of everyone."

The developers soon began swapping ideas on game development. "We showed them what we were working on," says Raffel, "and they seemed pretty smart, so we went over to see what they were doing, which was *Wolfenstein 3D*. Our reaction to that was 'Holy cow.'"

Impressed by what he saw, Raffel asked id programmer John Carmack if he could teach the Raven guys how to do that kind of work. "John said, 'Sure, it's really easy,'" Raffel laughs, "so we sent a couple of our programmers over, who came right back and said, 'There's no way we can do that.'" Raven asked instead if it could license id's technology, and thus the partnership was born. At the time, Carmack was working on a new engine—an iteration between the *Wolfenstein* and *Doom* engines—and Raven, as Raffel says, "could not believe the stuff Carmack was doing." Raven licensed the engine, and used it in its very next game, *ShadowCaster*, published by Origin in 1993.

Id's time in Madison, by the way, did not last long after that. "We had moved up in December," recalls Willits, "and John Carmack and John Romero just hated the cold." When Romero's car broke down and he was forced to walk back and forth to work in the cold, that was the last straw, so they soon packed up and headed to Texas, where they've been ever since.

AFTERSHOCK

A secret level in the Sega Saturn version of *Quake* lets you wrestle (yeah, wrestle) against *Quake* monsters.

most rolled eyes, comes near the end of my visit, when I ask, "So when are you guys going to be done?" Oh yeah. I forgot. This is Id. "When it's done" is the answer I should have known already

Still, with 50 people on the team at Raven and Id no longer distracted by *Doom 3*, the project is well on its way. The entire single-player game is mapped out, with many of the levels "done," (subject to tweaking and balancing issues) Most of the work now is in creating and balancing the multiplayer maps (see sidebar on page 64) which, of course, is huge when it comes to *Quake*, no matter how much the designers have emphasized the single-player game.

Despite the pressure on both companies to live up to the hype, there is a great sense of confidence from Raven and Id. After years of pursuing parallel careers, they are finally making a game together—a big one—and that creative collaboration is energizing all parties involved.

"We're both at the point," says Raffel, "where we just want to make a good game that people are going to love and that we'll be proud of. It surely isn't easy. The bar keeps rising and we keep trying to evolve with it. But this is a great collaboration, and frankly, we're just honored to be involved Because we probably wouldn't be here right now without Id."

"Mutual respect," says Stratton "That's what happens when you have two companies that have worked together for as long as we have. Unlike anyone we've ever worked with, working with Raven is a completely natural process. Everybody checks their egos at the door"

Yeah yeah sure Group hug, I guess. But where's the skepticism? Where's the hate? Surely there has got to be some angst, somewhere, as the struggle to finish *Quake 4* continues, especially in light of the up-and-down hype and backlash of *Doom 3*?

"Ya know, if this game turns out great," says Willits, "and I know it will, there are gonna be guys online giving Raven all the credit 'See, Id can't make games, the f---ers!'"

Now that's what I'm talking about.

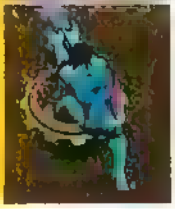
RAVEN'S MOTION-**CAPTURE STUDIO**

It's not unusual for game designers to employ motion capturing of human models as a technique for providing more realistic animations. What is more unusual is for a company to have its own motion-capture studio, as opposed to farming the work out to one of the big independent studios, such as House of Moves in Los Angeles. Just in time for *Quake 4*, Raven has built its own $100,000 motion-capture studio right on its premises, making it relatively painless to get all-new animations into the game. Most of the moves captured are short action sequences, like the ones shown here, but for scripted events or cut-scenes, entire sequences may be acted out. What this means for you is more realistic movement than you've seen in any *Quake* game to date. But how do you motion-capture a telefrag?

Raven Software founders Brian and Steve Raffel

Raven Software may not be as ostentatiously high profile as game companies like Rockstar or, um, Id Software, but in its 15 years in the business, Raven has quietly amassed an impressive portfolio of games. Brian and Steve Raffel founded the company in 1990 and still run the show today from their offices in Madison, WI. Raven's first game was *Black Crypt* in 1992, a role-playing game designed for the Commodore Amiga. But it was their second game, *ShadowCaster*, in 1993 that began their long relationship with Id Software. *ShadowCaster* used a hybrid engine of John Carmack's that was somewhere in between the *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* engines—and boasts being the first FPS to let gamers jump, swim, and fly. Here is a complete list of all of Raven's games to date.

Black Crypt (1992)
ShadowCaster (1993)
CyClones (1994)
Heretic (1994)
Hexen: Deathkings of the Dark Citadel (1996)
Necrodome (1996)
MageSlayer (1997)
Take No Prisoners (1997)
Hexen II (1997)
Hexen II: Portal of Praevus (1998)
Heretic II (1998)
Soldier of Fortune (2000)
Star Trek Voyager Elite Force (2000)
Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast (2002)
Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix (2002)
Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy (2003)
X-Men Legends (2004)



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Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

Sam Fisher's latest is just as much fun on the go.

SPLINTER CELL CHAOS THEORY

FINAL FANTASY VII SNOWBOARDING

>Cloud returns to the slopes.

WWE AFTERSHOCK

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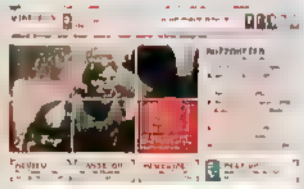

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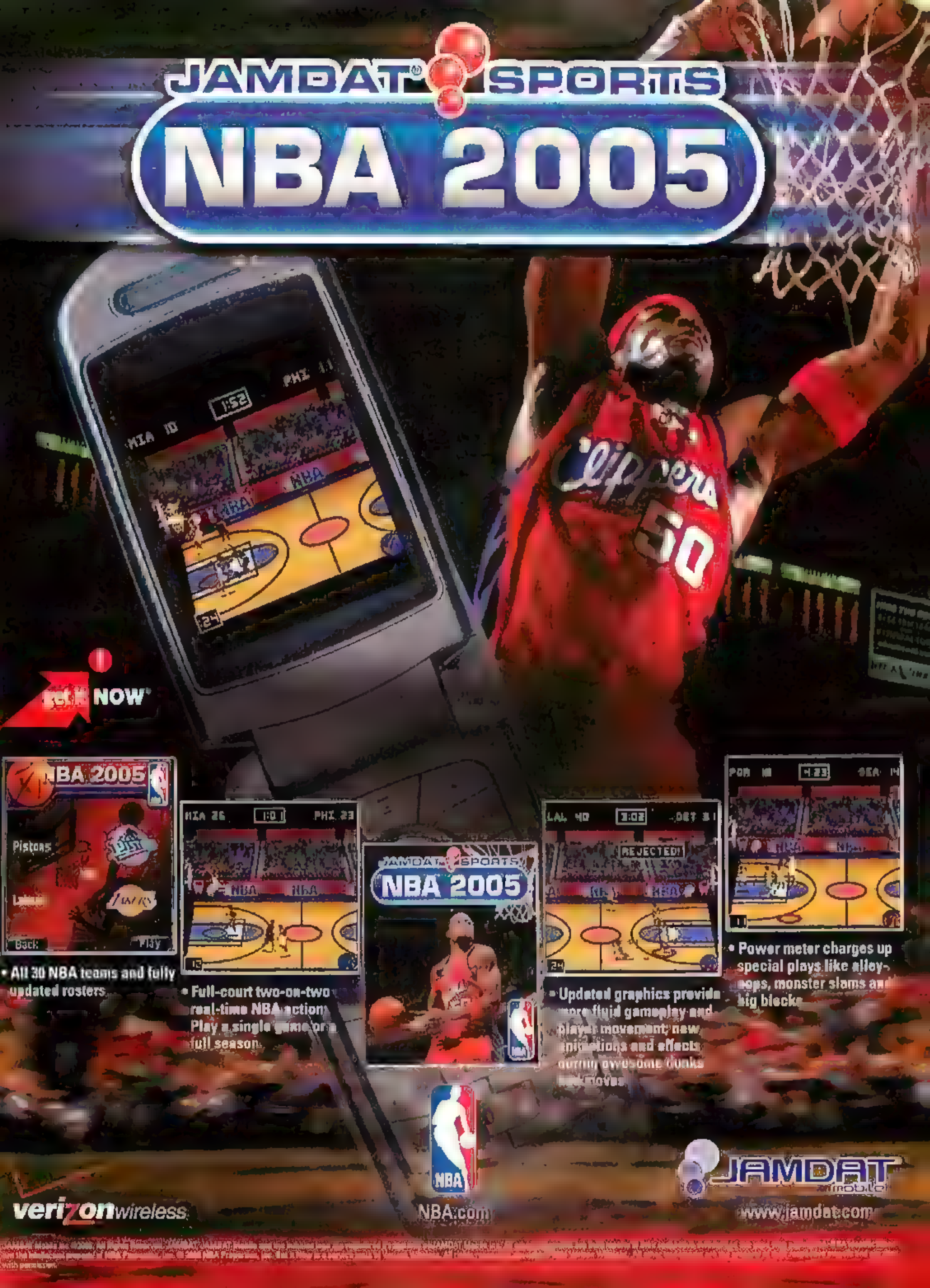
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SPLINTER CELL CHAOS THEORY

1UP reviews the N-Gage version of Ubisoft's stealth hit

Chaos Theory is the latest installment in Ubisoft's popular espionage series and the second *Splinter Cell* title to be featured on N-Gage. This time around, developer Gameloft didn't place Sam Fisher in a 2D sprite-based environment; rather it's managed to port *Chaos Theory* to the mobile phone in all its 3D glory—minus the power of a home console, of course. The result is a game that remains true to the look and feel of *Splinter Cell*, capturing the heart-pounding thrills in a portable format, but it's not quite perfect. To date, *Chaos Theory* is the finest display of the N-Gage's overall gaming abilities, yet there are a few areas of inconsistency that, on top of the challenging gameplay, make the game a bit more frustrating than it needs to be.

The NSA black-ops agent Sam Fisher of Third Echelon is back at it again, traveling the world on a mission to stop any threat to the safety of America. The order in which missions are played is consistent with the console releases, but modifications have been made to work within the limitations of the N-Gage hardware. Gameloft has redesigned each map, making the levels smaller and easier to navigate within the confines of a cell phone screen. This hasn't altered the gameplay in any major sense, but because *Splinter Cell* is a 3D game, certain camera issues become problematic. The manual camera rotation and the inability to zoom your point of view away from the character onscreen make it difficult to see surrounding obstacles, especially in confined spaces such as elevator shafts.

The manual camera system is controlled via the keypad and takes some getting used to. However, when mastered, the camera offers tight control, useful in situations where finely tweaking accuracy is important. It comes in handy when sneaking toward unsuspecting enemies, almost making up for the lack of an analog stick. All of the play mechanics of *Splinter Cell* titles remain—you can switch the lights on and off, pick locks, climb poles, and slit an opponent's throat—but it's the sensitivity of stealth maneuvering that poses a problem for this N-Gage game.

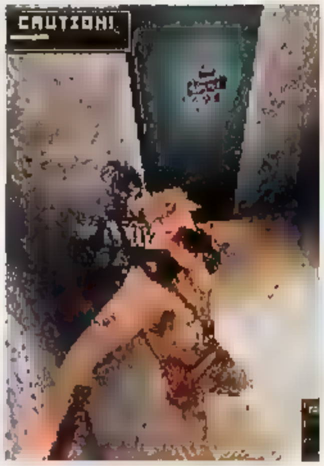
Graphically, the 3D models and variations in lighting and texturing are impressive feats for the N-Gage. There's such depth in level design and attention to detail that you'd be hard-pressed to find an N-Gage title that comes close to the quality of *Chaos Theory*.

Amon Tobin's incredibly composed soundtrack from the console versions is also nicely represented here, adding to the already rich atmosphere.

Stealth games are a sophisticated genre for the sophisticated gamer, and not all players have the patience or the attention span for the slow, finicky maneuvers of black ops. You either love it or you despise it, and very rarely are you somewhere in between. For those looking for an alternative to fast-moving genres overloaded with visual stimuli, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* is a brilliant change of pace.

Aside from the single-player mode, players have access to the N-Gage Arena to upload scores from each mission, as well as a multiplayer mode which uses Bluetooth wireless for cooperative play.

1UP SCORE: 9.0



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The Crazy Frog Goes To Mexico	fun1881
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Rock N Roll High School - The Ramones	real1261
Sheena Is A Punk Rocker - Ramones	real1262
So Sexy (Clean Edit) - Twista And R Kelly	real1263
Some Cut - Trillville	real1264
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Sunshine - Twista	real1266
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Turn Me On - Kevin Lyttle	real1268
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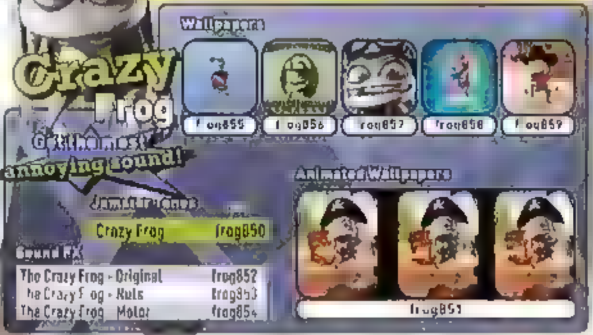

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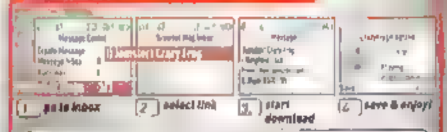

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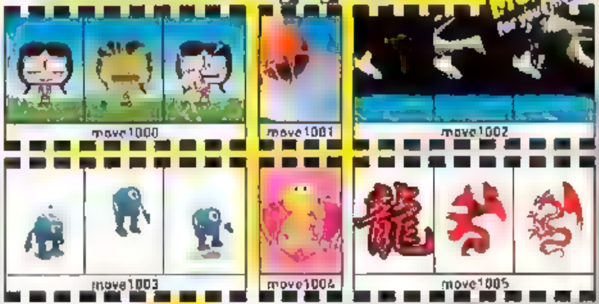

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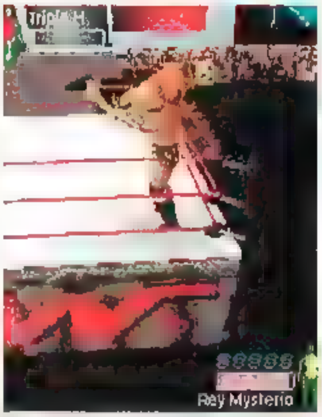
WWE AFTERSHOCK

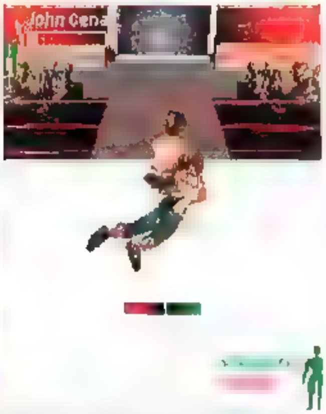
Wrestling mayhem returns to the N-Gage

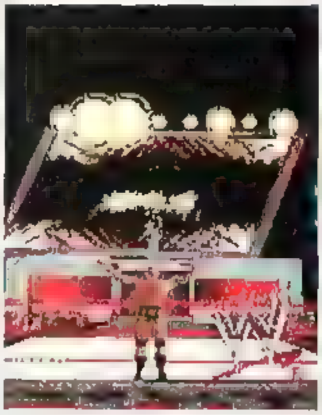
Call it fake, scripted, cheesy, or ridiculous, pro wrestling is as much a performance as a soap opera. Yet amid all the theatrics, one thing's clear: The wrestling moves are a painful joy to watch, and *WWE Aftershock* captures this aspect perfectly. It's not often the animation in 3D N-Gage titles manages to convey believable motion and weight, but *Aftershock* is the exception. Developer Exient has done a fine job animating the impacts of the brutal wrestling moves—stomps, falls, runs, kicks, and punches truly look and feel painfully realistic (all the more so with the aide of N-Gage's vibration feature).

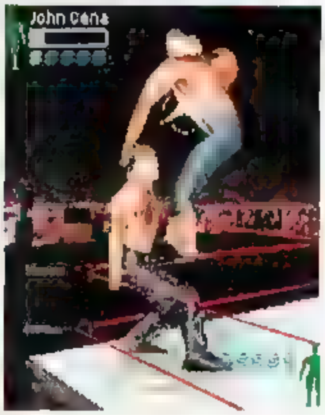
Aftershock sports some of today's biggest WWE superstars, including Eddie Guerrero, Chris Benoit, Chris Jericho, John Cena, Booker T, Ray Mysterio, Triple H, Edge, Ric Flair, Undertaker, and Big Show. But unlike *WWE Smackdown!*, which lacks many game features because of *Java* software limitations, *Aftershock* features character that look distinct and can perform their famed signature moves.

WWE Aftershock also features multiplayer gameplay via Bluetooth and should be available by the time your read this.









FINAL FANTASY VII SNOWBOARDING

Square Enix delivers a treat for mobile gamers

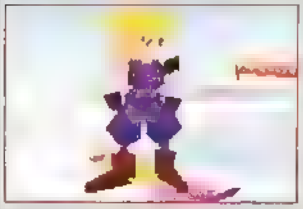
Squenix fans, your prayers have been heard! That's right—Cloud reprises his role in the snowboarding minigame from *Final Fantasy VII* on your mobile phone. Showing off the strength of today's mobile technology, *Final Fantasy VII Snowboarding* is a near-perfect port of the PlayStation minigame, from the graphics and sounds to the expressions on Cloud's face.

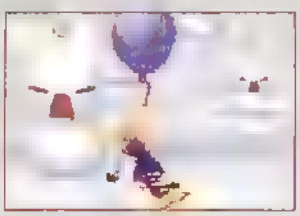
There are two modes in the game: score attack and time attack. In score attack, players earn points by collecting balloons, dodging obstacles (including trees, rocks, and skiing moogles), and finishing the race in a timely manner. There are three courses that correspond to different difficulty levels, and beating the advanced course unlocks the time attack mode, in which the objective is to finish as fast as possible.

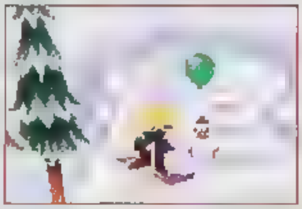
The game's controls have obviously been simplified for cellphone play, using the standard directional buttons and the OK key to jump, but the excitement remains. Cloud has two types of jumps to help him clear obstacles, a normal leap and a spin jump to weave through the crowds.

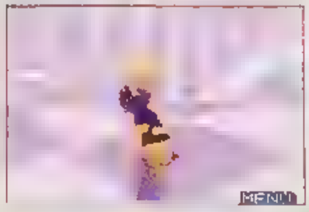
FFVII Snowboarding will be available by the time you read this. Square Enix will also be releasing a mobile version of *Musashi: Samurai Legend*, entitled *Musashi: Mobile Samurai*, on mobile platforms in the near future.

For more info on these games and compatible phones to play them on, check out Square Enix's mobile site at www.sqexm.com.









Reviews

The best and brightest

When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. But when life gives you chocolate-coated gold nuggets in a fur-lined bathtub filled with honey, you wallow. And so, gentle readers, it is our solemn duty to declare, "Get your wallow on."

We've been complaining about the dearth of midyear and summer games ever since Chag took a summer break from donning the mastodon skin and letting us chase him through the cave. To think, it only took a few solid thwacks with a still-wet femur to convince Chag to produce during the warmer months, but it has taken a few millennia for game publishers to catch on. But catch on they have, and the result is this month's happy embarrassment of riches: *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, *SWAT 4*, *Psychonauts*, *Act of War*, *Empire Earth II*, and *Silent Hunter III*. When has a bigger crop of great games been released outside of the holiday season? Never. If you get a tan this year, you have only yourself to blame. The gaming industry has finally stepped up.

REVIEW STANDARDS

[illegible]

EDITORS' CHOICE

[illegible]

Inside

[illegible]
Finally—an original WWII shooter

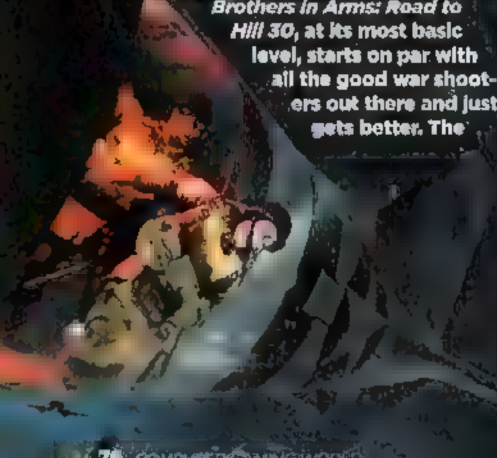
Splinter Cell [illegible]
Silent and deadly.

[illegible]
The latest and possibly greatest tac-sim.

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Gearbox GENRE: Shooter/Squad-based Strategy ESRB RATING: M REQUIRED: Pentium III 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 3GB install RECOMMENDED: 2.5GHz Athlon XP or Pentium 4, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet (2-4 players)

Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30

You're in the Army now



After the Normandy invasion level in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, everything changed. A platoon of war clones shipped, each one adding new scripted roller-coaster rides and celebrity voiceovers. But not one truly innovated—until now. *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*, at its most basic level, starts on par with all the good war shooters out there and just gets better. The amazing part is that by incorporating a new, easy-to-control strategic element and good A.I., developer Gearbox has created the first WWII game to truly make you feel like you're not fighting alone.

G.I. JONESING

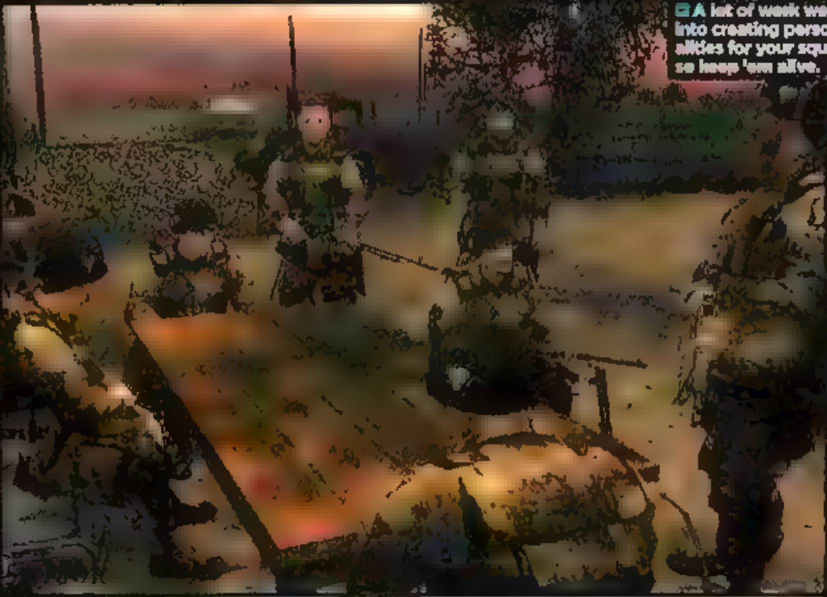
The biggest breakthrough by far is that Gearbox has managed to take the core elements of a strategy game and perfectly meld them with a first-person shooter. You can run through a field while issuing orders on the fly, without ever having to take your finger off the trigger. The controls are that intuitive.

This is one shooter in which your tactical skills are rewarded more than your ability to line up targets down the sights. This slows down the flow of the battles to a reasonable pace and ratchets up the tension; even as you try to suppress and flank your first machine-gun nest, your enemies are trying to do the same to you. This tactical aspect also plays itself into multiplayer, which comes off as more than just a simple afterthought. Even there, you're able to control at least one fire team on 10 different objective-based maps (unlike in *Republic Commando*, whose multiplayer devolves into an FPS free-for-all).

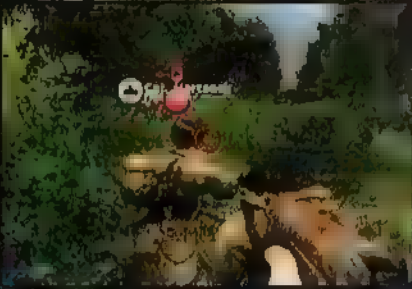
ALL ROADS LEAD TO HILL 30

By far the biggest complaint about almost every story-based FPS game has

> **This is one shooter in which your tactical skills are rewarded more than your ability to line up targets.**



A lot of work went into creating personalities for your squad, so keep 'em alive.



The soldiers' A.I. does a good job of looking for cover, communicating, and returning fire.

On some missions, you can also direct tanks. They make for great mobile cover.

to be the inevitable linearity. Follow the designated path, blast anything that moves, and watch out for the scripted tanks busting through fences along the way. Yes, there are a number of scripted events here—but *Brothers in Arms* finally opens up the battlefield and gives you multiple ways to win. Granted, the maps still lead to several story-critical choke points, but how you get there—and past them—depends on your tactical prowess.

There is one big downside to opening up the battlefields: the tease of openness in the environment. In Objective XYZ, my men had pinned down a sniper in a building and I stormed in and bagged the enemy. A few houses down the road, I encountered a similar scenario...except this time, an invisible wall blocked the open doorway. A few seconds later, I backed away, triggering a squad of Nazis to pour out of the building.

IN THE TRENCHES

Aside from a few such breaks from reality, *Brothers in Arms* is incredibly authentic. Most games of this ilk desperately try to capture the gritty desperation of war, and it's no different here. It's the stark, moody narration of your character, Sgt. Matt Baker, which sets the tone; choice bits of dialogue and warning shouts help convey what is happening and make you genuinely care about keeping your squadmates alive.

Brothers in Arms is like a playable version of *Band of Brothers* with game elements peppered in. Case in point: You have a minimized HUD, which quickly and easily shows you everything you absolutely need to know. Peek over a dirt mound, and if dirt clouds splatter the screen, you're under fire—listen to your screaming squadmates' advice and run for cover. Seeing red? You got tagged.

Since *Brothers in Arms* leans toward the realistic side, there are no bogus med packs lying around to heal you midlevel. If you take a dirt nap, you'll restart at intelligently spaced-out checkpoints. If any of your squadmates die midmission, though, they miraculously rise from the dead in the next level. Hey, we said that the game leans toward realistic; we didn't say it was a sim. ☒ Darren Gladstone

Verdict ★★★★☆

Hey, you got your strategy game in my WWII FPS! Hey, you got your WWII FPS in my strategy game!

BATTLEFIELD TACTICS

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51st Infanterie Division

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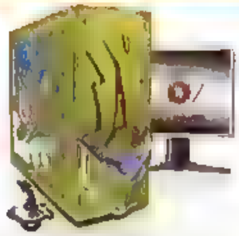

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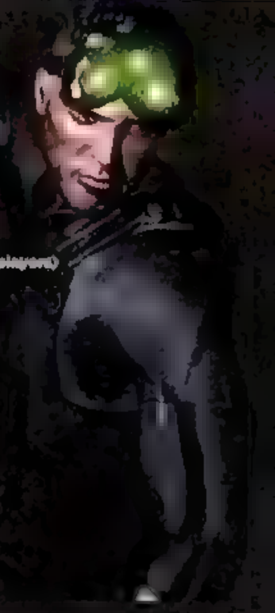
Editors' Choice



PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Stealth-Action** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 256MB RAM, 4GB install, DVD-ROM** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, headset** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-4 players)**

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

Clear and present danger

Like *Splinter Cell* and *Pandora Tomorrow* before it, *Chaos Theory* spins your basic twisty-turny techno-thriller story involving international intrigue, corporate espionage, destructive electronic algorithms, counterintelligence, counter-counterintelligence, and the looming threat of—you guessed it!—World War III. It also involves stealth and subterfuge, as you step once again into the sneaky no-squeak shoes of NSA black-ops agent Sam Fisher, who's been granted the fifth freedom to make the world safer by whatever means necessary.

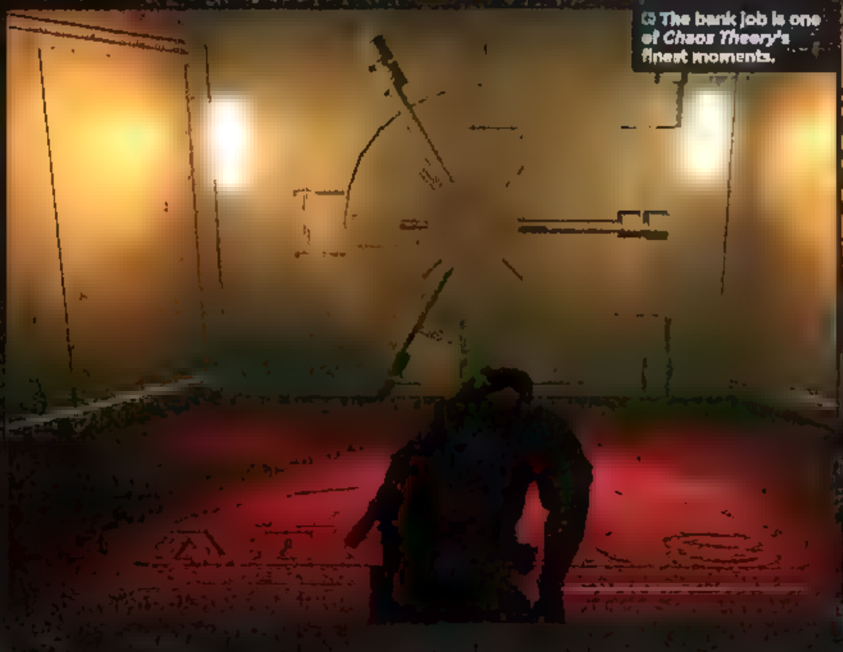
But unlike in previous games, "by whatever means necessary" actually has some resonance: This time out, your commanding officer won't abort missions at the drop of a pin, which means you aren't shackled to playing *Chaos Theory* a certain way. This opens up the gameplay immensely, as you can now approach problems from several different angles. Frontal assaults are still suicidal, but if you prefer a more direct approach to silencing every guard in your path, you generally won't be punished for it. Of course, stealth is always advised—to help you, your pistol is equipped with a jamming device that can be used to silently disable lights and other electronics. The more subtle you are, and the more primary and ancillary objectives you complete, the better your rating at the end of each mission.

NIGHT MOVES

Each of the game's 10 missions takes you somewhere new, ranging from a Manhattan penthouse to several exotic Asian locales. The most memorable level is a Panamanian bank, which you'll infiltrate in search of black-market arms shipment data. It feels like something right out of *Ocean's Eleven* or *Hudson Hawk* (but in a good way), complete with laser beams, a massive vault, and a desperate, pulse-pounding rush to your extraction point. It's a tense, exciting, and very rewarding experience—which is something that can be said about *Chaos Theory* in its entirety.

More so than any other stealth-action game, *Chaos Theory* really makes you *feel* like a spy. This is due largely to the nonlinear mission structure, but also to several new gameplay elements that really raise the bar. For starters, your HUD now features a meter that provides feedback about the ambient noise level; as long as you stay quieter than your surroundings, you can use the environment to your advantage. Furthermore, a cleverly designed hacking minigame comes into play when you need to access secure computer systems or door alarms. It basically boils down to a timing-based matching game, but it's presented with a tech-savvy style that really adds to the black-ops atmosphere.

Agent Fisher is also armed with a combat knife, which can cut through soft material for covert break-ins or speed along the interrogation of hapless guards. The interrogations are always entertaining, and you'll often find your-



The bank job is one of *Chaos Theory*'s finest moments.

Those paper-thin Japanese rice walls are great for facilitating sneak attacks.

You'll learn to rely on the darkness pretty quickly.

"If you tell me something useful, I won't stuff your corpse into one of those crates over there."

Two neophyte operatives team up for some side missions in *Chaos Theory*'s multiplayer co-op mode.

It's a tense, exciting, and very rewarding experience.

self accosting guards just to see what the next threat will be. Lead voice actor Michael Ironside has really grown into the role of Sam Fisher, playing him here with an increased note of cynicism and haggard wisdom. Our hero is starting to show his age—so it's no small wonder that, at one point, he's reinforced with a behind-the-scenes cleanup crew, which paves the way for another big addition: cooperative multiplayer.

CLOAK AND DAGGER

Along with the returning versus mode (see sidebar), *Chaos Theory* features four two-player co-op missions that act as a sort of side story. This mode introduces several moves designed specifically for team play, such as a *Mission: Impossible*–style drop-in stunt, a high-velocity judo throw that can send your partner flying, and the tried-and-true leg boost. You'll definitely want to play with a friend, though there isn't much lasting appeal once you've learned each map—and with only four missions, co-op mode seems to have gotten short shrift. Still, it's a fun diversion from the single-player story line.

Aside from the somewhat shaky lack of co-op depth, *Chaos Theory* is a finely tuned package of killer visuals, intriguing storytelling, and highly rewarding stealth gameplay that succeeds in providing a good challenge with minimal frustration. It is the culmination of not only the *Splinter Cell* franchise, but perhaps the entire stealth-action genre. ■ Ryan Scott

Verdict ★★★★★

Quite possibly the best stealth-action game to date.

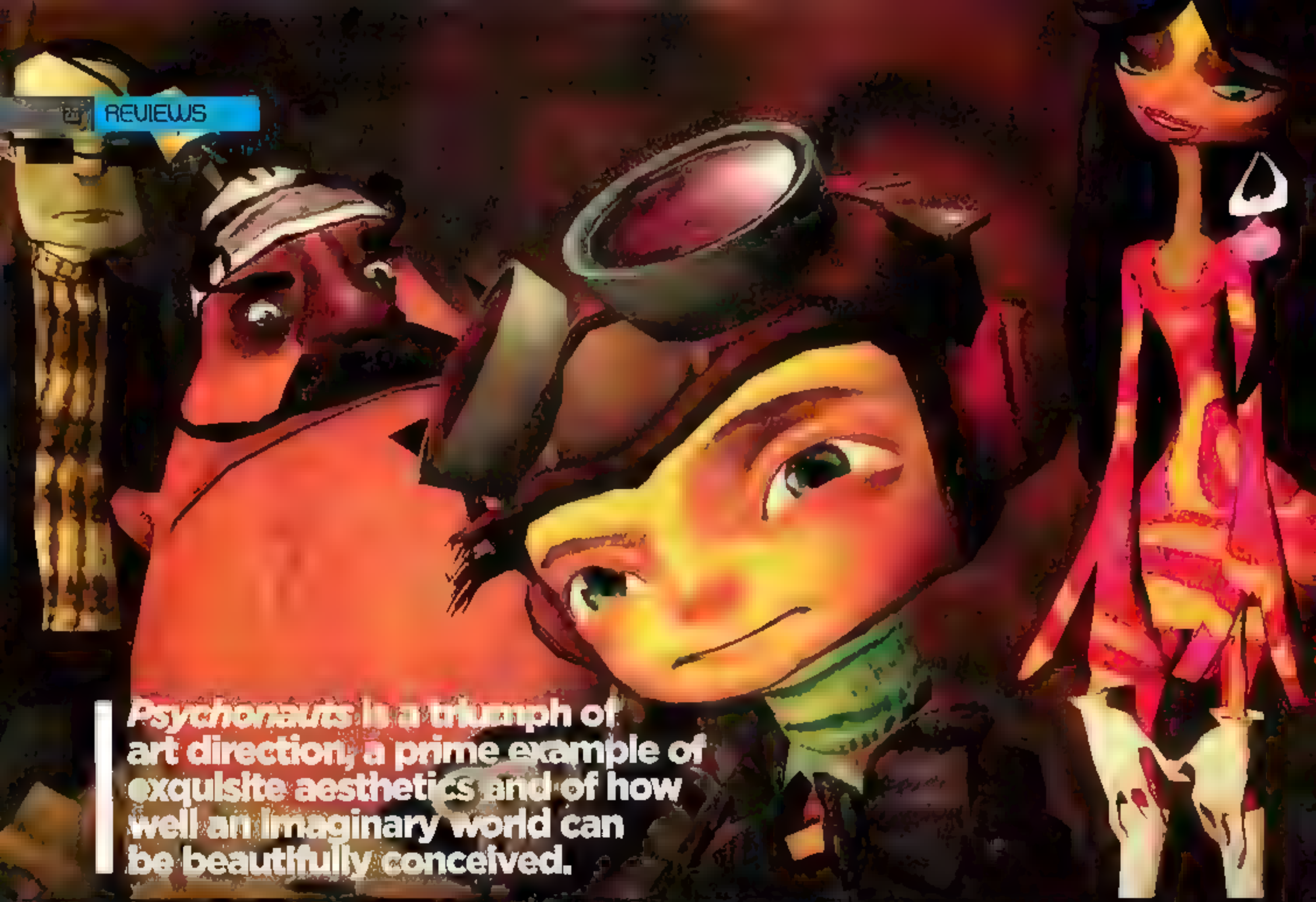
New maps, new gadgets, and new gameplay modes are at your disposal in the ever-popular versus game.

The versus mode is a challenging game of cat and mouse.

SHADOW WARRIORS

Pandora Tomorrow's 2-on-2 versus mode was well received, and *Chaos Theory* brings several additions to the spies-versus-mercenaries formula. You'll find a few fresh maps (and some old favorites), as well as some new toys. Mercs now have a number of primary armament choices and a browsing device that is used to access the map's surveillance network. Spies get a camouflage suit, as well as a heartbeat sensor that can be used to expose nearby threats.

The gameplay still has a big learning curve—in fact, you're now required to complete a mandatory tutorial level before jumping online. The classic neutralization objectives are combined into a single story mode, which is supplemented with a "how long can you hold it" disc hunt mode and a self-explanatory deathmatch mode. The online competition is tough, but once you acclimate yourself to the gameplay, it's an absolute blast.



> ***Psychonauts*** **is a triumph of art direction, a prime example of exquisite aesthetics and of how well an imaginary world can be beautifully conceived.**

PUBLISHER: **Majesco** DEVELOPER: **Double Fine Studios** GENRE: **3D Platformer** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 2.75GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Psychonauts

Head games

EDITORS' CHOICE

About halfway through *Psychonauts*, my sister, standing behind my chair and watching over my shoulder, asked, "What exactly is this game about?" My explanation sounded something like this:

"Well, you play this kid Raz who's at a summer camp for kids with psychic abilities, and you find out that the guy running the camp is stealing everyone's brains so he can use them to power these weird tanks, so you have to jump inside a bunch of people's heads and fight their mental demons using your psychic powers so you can save all the kids and eventually earn your stripes as a Psychonaut, a kind of psychic secret agent."

Greeting mental demons with a grin.

"Right. OK," my sister responded. "Uh, I'm going to go watch TV."

While my explanation is accurate, I freely concede it doesn't really tell you what Psychonauts is about. Like many games of this ilk—action/adventure/3D platformers—you have to play it to understand it. Luckily, *Psychonauts* offers lots of good reasons to do just that.

A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Psychonauts is a triumph of art direction, a prime example of exquisite aesthetics and of how well an imaginary world can be beautifully conceived. I have no doubt that the console versions will also look amazing, but playing *Psychonauts* on the PC is one of those visual treats that remind you of why, in some cases, PC gaming delivers a graphical experience that a console will never be able to touch.

That said, the game virtually forces you to play it console style—that is, with a gamepad. Although it's very easy to map the controls to the keyboard and mouse, let's face it—jumping puzzles are easier to deal with via a gamepad.

Gameplay ranges from the collect-to-trade tasks and jumping puzzles that virtually define platformers to puzzles tough enough to challenge above-average adult minds. Even die-hard adventure-game players will relate to the feeling of awe and

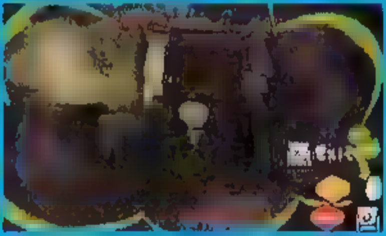
MENTAL **CRUELTY**

As Raz makes his way through the increasingly bizarre confines of various characters' gray matter, he earns psychic powers that enable him to stave off mental demons and more easily traverse the wacky worlds inside folks' heads. Here's a look at Raz's arsenal.

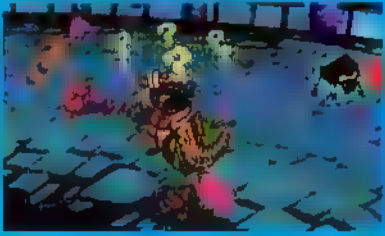
PYROKINESIS
He's a firestarter, a twisted firestarter. Raz can raise the temperature of objects and enemies to set 'em ablaze.

INVISIBILITY
It won't last for more than a few seconds, but that's long enough to sneak past a bad guy or two.

LEVITATION
Grab the thought bubble above Raz's head and bounce on it to jump or use it as a balloon to float. Hint: Float higher and farther by looking for bubbles, steam, etc.

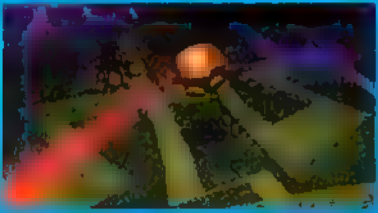


CLAIRVOYANCE
Raz's knowing eye sees all. The clairvoyance power works on people and on certain objects, allowing Raz to see what they see.



CONFUSION
Like any good agent, Raz knows how to confuse his enemies long enough to get the upper hand. Hint: This is particularly useful in some of the later boss battles.

TELEKINESIS
A giant hand that springs forth from Raz's forehead, telekinesis lets him pick up and toss enemies and objects. Pay attention to what various characters say when you lift them into the air—it's a crack up.



PSI-BLAST
Raz's main "weapon," psi-blasts take out enemies with a burst of psychic energy. Later in the game, your psi-blast grows powerful enough to zap up to four enemies at once.

frustration some of the puzzles leave you with. They're the sort that can really tick you off while you're struggling to solve them, but once you begin to see how they come together, even in your frustration, you admire their cleverness. And help is always available in the form of Agent Ford Cruller, former head of the Psychonauts, whose mental projection has taken up residence in Raz's head and can be summoned by Raz waving a piece of bacon. Cruller's hints don't give too much away but will always give you enough of a nudge to get "unstuck."

SMARTY-PANTS

Psychonauts' humor is quintessential Tim Schafer, in the vein of *Grim Fandango*. To wit: Two other campers explain to Raz that he can collect arrowheads buried around the camp:

"The arrowheads are buried in the ground, but they let out a little gas every once in a while."

"Just like Coach Oleander."

"So if you see any, just pull them out."

"Like truffles."

Levels are quite high concept—Waterloo World involves you helping Fred Bonaparte conquer his Napoleonic complex, and in the Black Velvet level, you're wandering around in the equivalent of one of those paintings of Elvis you can buy in a gas station parking lot in Barstow. The Gloria's Theater level is particularly bizarre, populated by freakish children putting on a series of weird theatrical pieces and a boss in the form of a blowhard theater critic whose ammunition consists of ink droplets that explode and pepper you with words from bad reviews: "Trite! (Boom!) Lazy! (Bang!)"

Psychonauts is not geared specifically for kids or for adults; despite the bright colors and platformer aspect, conceptually, the idea of jumping into people's psyches to confront their mental demons is probably a bit much for children. And the idea of collecting anything can get tedious for adults more interested in solving high-concept puzzles. But *Psychonauts* is usually balanced enough to get you from one task to the next before you want to toss your gamepad in frustration—not always, but usually.

Boss battles are the game's most frustrating task. To be fair, I don't love boss battles in the first place, and here, they're particularly frustrating because you can earn psychic powers before you're able to use them in a boss fight. For example, I wanted to use telekinesis to pick up and throw a tank that was blowing me to bits, but only levitation and shooting would work on it. Since the powers are so clever and cool, it bugged me when I had them but couldn't use them.

I suspect *Psychonauts* is going to kill on the consoles, and ordinarily I might suggest you buy a console version, especially if you don't have a gamepad for your PC—in general, games like this simply play better on a console. But I'm not going to suggest that. *Psychonauts* is, for once, a well-done PC platformer—so well done and so very good looking, it's worth buying a gamepad for it.

☒ Kristen Salvatore

Verdict ★★★★½
An expert platformer full of creativity, humor, and brilliant art design.

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Eugen Systems GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 5GB install, 64MB videocard RECOMMENDED: 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

Act of War

Out-command-and-conquering *Command & Conquer*

Calling something a clone is usually a way of dismissing it, which is what many people will doubtlessly do when they observe—correctly, mind you—that Atari's *Act of War* is a *Command & Conquer: Generals* clone. The influence is obvious in the game's scale, the superweapons, the rigid rock-paper-scissors unit interplay, the streamlined economics, the way tiny infantry are mashed under vehicles, and even the "don't you worry about the details" interface. Like *Generals*, this is a big, beautiful sprawl of stuff blowing up: soldiers, tanks, helicopters, cars parked on the side of the road, satellites, and entire city blocks of San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

But then there's the question of what do you call a clone when it's actually better than its inspiration? This is what's happened with *Act of War*. Although it's lacking *Generals*' playful sensibility and imagination (the three sides are basically the United States, the United States, and the non-United States), it's got a much better handle on what it takes to make a good real-time strategy game.

This is your base without a sentry drone.

Following the leader.

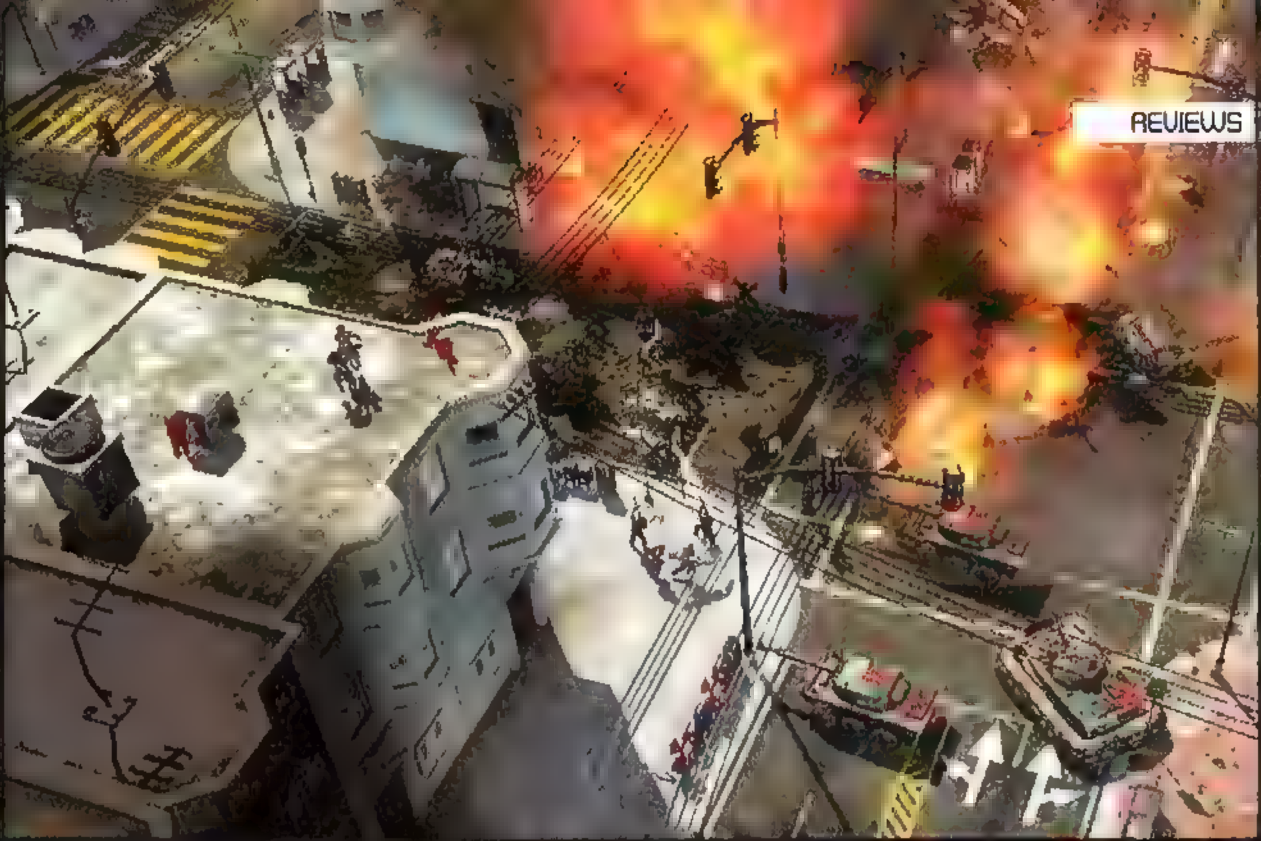
CLANCY PANTS

Act of War is a tie-in with one of those turgid, subpar thrillers you'd get at an airport. The plot is only vaguely related to the potboiler of the same name by Dale Brown, in which powered armor suits are used to fight ecoterrorists who nuke Houston. Although the single-player campaign is slightly less ridiculous, it's just as turgid. The cinematics have good production values to cover for the bad actors, but the missions are your typical scripted challenges with no replay value.

But in multiplayer and skirmish games, *Act of War* cuts loose and really proves it's not just a technically savvy action-oriented RTS in the style of *Generals*. Instead, it's a shrewd design that introduces some welcome new dynamics to the genre. Perhaps most noticeable is the way it boldly adds a prisoner-of-war subgame.

Whenever you "kill" an enemy unit,

What do you call a clone when it's actually better than its inspiration?



The streets of San Francisco.

there's a chance a soldier will simply be wounded or a vehicle will leave behind a pilot. If there aren't any enemy units nearby, your opponent still controls them; he can either heal them or get a cash refund by returning them to base. But you can use your infantry to capture these helpless little guys for an immediate cash reward. What's more, if you've built a prison, each one will steadily generate income. Since the oil wells in *Act of War* tend to dry up quickly, prisoners of war are an important endgame source of income. They're also a valuable way to pick out targets for your aircraft and superweapons. Any prisoner can be "interrogated," which means you can trade him for a temporary line of sight to any location on the map.

All of this adds a fair amount of busywork to the already fast pace (there's no variable speed for multiplayer games). But it's ultimately an option to trade your attention—the most crucial resource in any RTS—for money. It fits snugly with everything else and feels like an integral part of the game rather than a gimmick.

ACT OF BALANCE

In fact, *Act of War*'s main strength is how well everything fits together, from the prisoners to the superweapons to airpower. Everything is arranged into a tidy system, unlike many RTSes, which have a neat rock-paper-scissors balance that gets smashed up by a nuclear option at the top of the tech tree. But in *Act of War*, there are even counters for the superweapons. If you want to nuke someone's base, you might have to send in an infantry force to take out the sentry drone shielding it.

Similarly, aircraft are built into the game as a sort of recurring "god power." You buy them at an air-traffic control tower, but they live off the map. A set of buttons appears at the bottom of the screen, allowing you to call them in periodically. Some planes are good against vehicles, some are good against buildings, and some are good for countering other planes. It's a distinct layer of gameplay, but like the superweapons, it folds into the system nicely without simply trumping everything under it.

With only a few exceptions, *Act of War*'s interface is tidy and accommodating. The units move in formation and choose their targets wisely. The A.I. is quite good, particularly at the tactical level, where you don't have to baby-sit an army. Unlike in *Command & Conquer: Generals*, your troops won't be slaughtered by a single soldier because they're too busy plinking away at a harmless building to notice they're being shot.

And this is ultimately how *Act of War* manages to distinguish itself: You get a sense that the developers actually play real-time strategy games rather than just ape them. ■ Tom Chick

Verdict ★★★★☆

A well-crafted RTS that's both derivative and innovative.

The first RTS with a medivac chopper.

PUBLISHER **Sierra** DEVELOPER **Mad Doc** GENRE **RTS** ESRB RATING **T** REQUIRED **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 128MB videocard** RECOMMENDED **Pentium 4 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER **Internet, LAN (2-10 players)**

Empire Earth II

From clubs to nukes and everything in between

Look, guys, I dressed my horsey up like a tiger! Zooming in up close offers some nice detail in *Empire Earth II*.

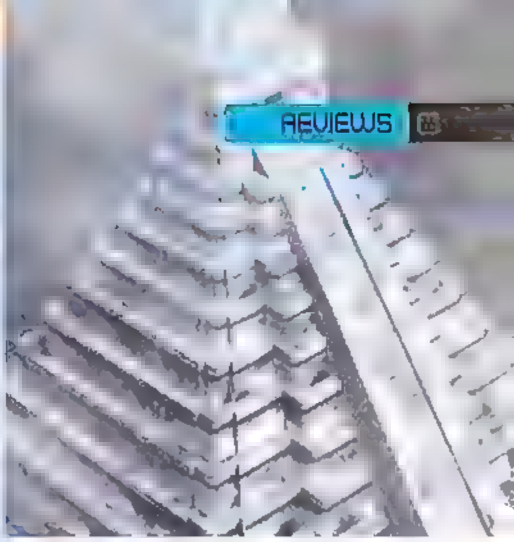
***Empire Earth* (2001) is the über–*Age of Empires*: a vast, sprawling, 12,000-year trip through history and conquest courtesy of original *AOE* designer Rick Goodman. *Empire Earth*'s look, interface, and conventions borrowed heavily from *AOE* but brought an epic scope to the table. *Empire Earth II* is an entirely new game from a different developer, but it swamps the gamer with options and piles on enough new features to give it an unexpectedly fresh feel.**

BIG NUMBERS

"Epic" remains the watchword for *Empire Earth II*. This is a huge game, with 15 epochs, some 350 units, 14 civilizations, 275 buildings, and 12,000 years of history. Even after accounting for civilization variants, there are still about three dozen different basic unit types and about two dozen major buildings, plus unique wonders and units for each civ, all of them evolving and changing with research and civilization advancement.

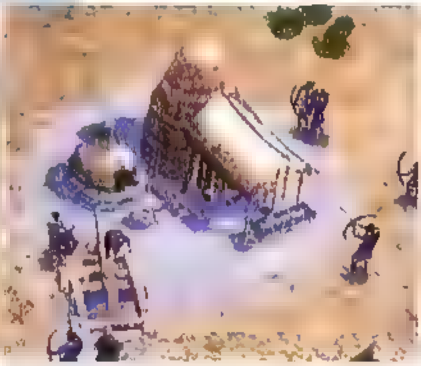
The skirmish mode (the only truly free-ranging mode in the game) is flush with options for everything from starting season to game pacing to specific victory requirements. A new system tracks the progress of all players, rewarding "crowns" for military, economic, and imperial achievement. Each crown allows the gamer to select from a menu of temporary bonuses, such as reduced unit cost, increased economic output, and similar enhancements. Diplomacy is handled with a bit more subtlety, allowing sides to set very specific diplomatic states, which may include line-of-site sharing, border and resource rights, tributes, and gifts of individual resources, units, and territories

You sunk my battleship, mostly because of bad pathfinding.



The seasonal weather can be remarkably obtrusive, fogging the graphics to the point of frustration. Thankfully, you can turn it off.

Units can gain the ability to capture buildings whole by prolonged siege, as in this mission of the San Juan Hill portion of the American campaign.



Each of the 14 civs in the game comes with its own benefits and units.

The free and easy use of nukes late in the game—with little discernable penalty—can create some hasty endings.

TOOL TIME

Empire Earth II's most impressive aspect, however, is not its size or individual gameplay tweaks, but some welcome and often novel interface elements. The best of these is the long-overdue Citizen Manager, which places every aspect of citizen control on a single screen. From this screen you can see all the available resources and assign citizens to harvest them, order citizens to build a particular resource structure, or simply designate a certain number of citizens to each task, including repair, construction, and technology research.

The second big interface enhancement is a picture-in-picture display, which can be tagged to six different locations and is fully interactive, allowing you to issue unit and building orders. This PIP image can be swapped with the main screen and includes a "flare" bookmark that marks the location of the last alert. Though it may take RTS veterans some time to integrate this feature into their play style, the ability to instantly monitor any location and give precise movement and action orders without a lot of map-hopping is very welcome. Combine this feature with a minimap and a regional map display that marks key locations and events, and you have a slick and effective solution to map navigation and management.

Finally, the new War Planner screen offers a welcome solution to the problem of communication and coordination with allies. Here you can create a war plan using simple drawing tools to place arrows and instructions on a map of the world. These maps can then be sent to all your allies, who either accept or reject them. Once accepted, they provide a readily accessible blueprint for a coordinated attack. The feature is implemented for both single- and multiplayer games, but A.I. allies don't appear to pay much attention to the plans after accepting them.

FIGHTING FIT

Other than this, A.I. opponents are actually very, very good, frequently unpredictable and featuring noticeable personalities. Plenty of difficulty options allow A.I. foes to be tweaked for skill, bonuses, and handicaps, creating a wide range of challenges, from none at all to fearsome. The never-ending RTS complaint of "bad pathfinding" rears its head on occasion, particularly in tight areas and with large units. Battleships in particular seem utterly baffled about where to go.

The game's other weakness, at least for some, will be the campaigns. There are three major multiscenario campaigns: Korea (early epochs), Germany (middle), and America (late), along with a couple of novelty campaigns, Normandy (both sides) and Dynasty Clashes of China. These campaigns are broken into tiny, noncontiguous, heavily scripted bite-sized portions that seem to end just as they gain a head of steam. They pile on a lot of "go here, do this" orders that may well appeal to gamers who like a structured, objective-based approach to scenarios. These are really just occasionally clever linked scenarios, not true campaigns. Fortunately, the skirmish mode has just about everything a gamer could want to craft a custom experience, including a map generator, full editor, and plentiful settings.

Only a few bugs have slipped through, the most notable being a weird unit-selection problem. The double-click option to select all units of a particular type didn't always work. The bigger problem is the appalling lack of decent hotkey implementation, which may well be a deal breaker for some. On whole, however, *Empire Earth II* builds upon many of its predecessor's strengths to deliver a sprawling RTS conquest game that is still remarkably user-friendly.

Thomas L. McDonald

> **"Epic" remains the watchword for *Empire Earth II*.**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Good A.I. and several welcome interface features make for a strong, epic RTS.

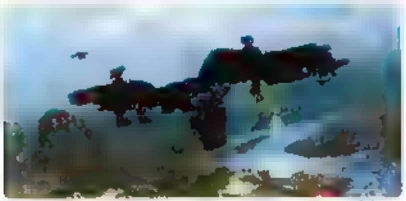
[illegible]

Gary Grigsby's World at War

The quartermaster's *Axis & Allies*

[illegible] that allows for multiplayer [illegible] looking for a faster [illegible] **Di Luo**

Verdict ★★★½☆
Fast paced and flawed, but ultimately enjoyable.



Just like a *Crimson Skies* mission, but with a flying battleship instead of a zeppelin.

Sit in the cockpit if you find flying from behind the ship disorienting.

Despite the game's age and Xbox origins, it looks great.

PUBLISHER **DreamCatcher Games** DEVELOPER **Yager Development** GENRE **Shooter** ESRB RATING **T** REQUIRED **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 5.5GB install** RECOMMENDED **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER **LAN (2-8 players)**

Aerial Strike: The Yager Missions

Your joystick is inadequate

If you have an Xbox in the house, *Aerial Strike* may look familiar: This aerial shooter was released to good reviews as *Yager* on that console way back in early 2003. So how well does it make the jump to PC?

As a mercenary pilot chasing a mysterious band of sky pirates, you'll fly 22 scripted missions where the main goal is to shoot everything in sight, while occasionally flying escort missions or taking down a large enemy target.

For a game that started as a console shooter, *Aerial Strike* is surprisingly tough to control—in fact, this game's spacey Sagittarius fighter/bomber is harder to fly than your average flight-sim jet. Shifting between the two wildly different modes of flight—the helicopterlike VTOL mode and standard jet mode—takes a while to master, and the abundance of keyboard commands is overwhelming. Joysticks are supported, but if you choose to use one, be sure to take advantage of the control customization: Pulling back makes you smack into the ground until you reverse the axes.

Once you tame the controls, the missions are mostly entertaining, except the ones that stick you at an antiaircraft gun for tedious shooting-gallery action. There's also no save function; checkpoints let you restart midmission once you achieve certain goals, but nothing's saved to disk until you complete the mission. And the 40-minute, seven-disc install might make you apologize for complaining about Steam—this really should've shipped on DVD.

Aerial Strike is a decent if unspectacular game...if you can master its controls. *Crimson Skies* fans and aerial action nuts will find it worth the $20. **Denny Atkin**

Verdict ★★½☆☆
A cheap excuse to shoot things out of the sky.

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PUBLISHER **DreamCatcher** DEVELOPER **Wargaming.net** GENRE **War** ESRB RATING **T** REQUIRED **Pentium III 750, 256MB RAM, 570MB install**
RECOMMENDED **Pentium III 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER **Internet, LAN (2-44 players)**

Domination

I don't know what you're sayin'—but I like it

Domination **is not, despite the game box's protestations to the contrary, "*Massive Assault* like never before." Well, it is—if you don't include the word "never." Now, this is not necessarily a bad thing: *Domination* provides the same challenging, chess-match-style gameplay (with some welcome additions) that you liked in its forebears. Be warned, though: It comes with all the familiar foibles, as well as some new ones.**

ONE-MAN SHOW

Without a doubt, *Domination*'s biggest improvement over previous *Massive Assault* games is its robust single-player experience. In addition to two lengthy campaigns, there are clever scenarios, an assault mode (in which you try to take over a series of well-defended bases), a world domination mode, and a career mode in which you can build your humble lieutenant into a formidable general. And this time around, the game's two playable factions actually have meaningful differences (though not many), which helps make the already strong multiplayer even better.

Domination does not rock the *Massive Assault* boat with reinvented gameplay. Every turn unfolds in phases, during which you buy units, place them, maneuver, shoot, hit the End Turn button, rinse, and repeat. Each unit moves a set number of hexes regardless of terrain, does a set number of damage points regardless of armament, and costs a set amount—with no upgrades available. This may sound simplistic, but the game does a stellar job of throwing subtle tactical situations at you from mission to mission—you never get the feeling of "How many roads must a man walk down before he gets some frickin' variety?" Moreover, the designers included an "undo" function, minimizing the cycle of trial and error that tends to bog down games of this type.

INSIDE THE BAD ACTOR'S STUDIO

This may come off as a cheap shot since you can skip most of it, but I'd be breaching my sacred *CGW* oath if I didn't mention how utterly and completely torturous the writing and voice acting are in this game. All the characters come off like high schoolers plodding through their badly memorized class president campaign speeches, and the writing makes *Manos: The Hands of Fate* look like Tom Stoppard's finest. One of the actresses even goes the extra mile and pronounces colonel as "koll-o-nell."

Another problem is the game's lack of a real tutorial. To be sure, there is a "tutorial campaign," but it consists almost entirely of your CO casting you into the fire and telling you to play the missions until you get them right. Thanks, koll-o-nell. Fortunately, the intuitive control system makes it pretty easy to get a handle on the action, but there are a lot of subtleties in the game engine that you're forced simply to stumble upon.

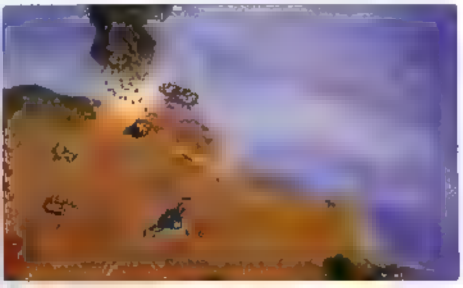
In spite of a few problems, there's nothing here bad enough to cause anyone to go on a three-state killing spree. If you're looking for a consistent strategic challenge, you could do a lot worse than *Domination*. **Eric Neigher**

Without a doubt, *Domination*'s biggest improvement over previous *Massive Assault* games is its robust single-player experience.

Verdict ★★★☆☆
A solid war game with the worst dialogue and acting ever.

I shall smash your ugly tank!

Sometimes, the tactical situation is very subtle. This is not one of those times.



Air power is expensive, but it can make all the difference if the enemy has neglected to purchase antiair shields.

"Target, 2 klicks out.
Lock n' load.
Let's look alive,
Gentlemen."
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20th ANNIVERSARY NOVALOGIC

NOVALOGIC

DOLBY DIGITAL

NovaWorld

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence

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PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** DEVELOPER: **Irrational Games** GENRE: **Tactical Sim**[illegible] RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium** [illegible] **RAM, 2GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4, 128MB videocard** [illegible] **LAN, Internet (2-16 players)**

SWAT 4

Back in blue

The last time I saw *SWAT 4*, it was pulling away from its realistic, tactical roots to become just another shooter dressed in police gear. Then it vanished until Irrational Games, the makers of *Freedom Force* and *System Shock 2*, took over the project and kept the hopes of another brilliant tac-sim alive. Still, could Irrational really pull it off? Could it revive the series and take it off life support? When I successfully completed the high-octane restaurant mission and then moved on to a mission that contained the chilling horror of busting a Dahmer doppelganger, all doubts were removed. I had discovered my new favorite tactical shooter.

FRESH UNIFORM

As a tactical simulation, *SWAT 4* provides the same gut-wrenching tension and realism as its predecessor, but it adds a streamlined command interface, simpler HUD, better damage model, expanded arsenal of police gear, user-friendly mission map editor, and a plethora of high-intensity missions to the proceedings, as well as more realistic A.I. and enhanced multiplayer support. Yeah...that's all. Oh, and the Unreal technology powering the game makes it pretty sharp looking to boot.

As the element commander of a five-man SWAT team, your job is to deploy your officers to gain control of some pretty hairy crises, tackling such objectives as bringing order to chaos or rescuing civilians. Unlike in military combat sims, where lethal force is expected, *SWAT 4* relies instead on police rules of engagement, where compliance is the rule. No blitzing into buildings and taking out every bad guy on the map—you only shoot if the lives of your officers or innocents are at risk. If suspects are willing to surrender, you must apprehend and cuff them rather than kill them.

Keeping your finger from pulling the trigger is a challenging proposition, especially when your Optiwand (a video-camera device used to peer around corners and underneath doors) shows an agitated group of gangsters holding hostages inside a dance hall. Once you give the order to "breach, bang, and clear" the locked room leading into the hall, your team mustn't succumb to pressure. Knowing when to order your officers to utilize stun guns, pepper spray, or less-

Every entry is a white-knuckle experience.

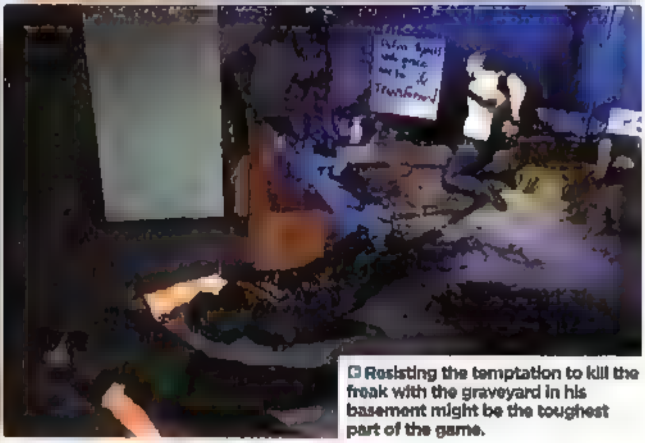
lethal beanbag-firing shotguns instead of just mowing down noncompliant bad guys with GB36 assault rifles requires quick, cool wits. Be indecisive, and you'll discover how quickly hostages get waxed and your officers get blown away. Whether you're raiding a weapon smuggler's den while hoping to avoid shooting an unsuspecting undercover law-enforcement agent or protecting hospital patients from assassins looking to kill a foreign diplomat, *SWAT 4* somehow manages to top the grit and intensity of the excellent *SWAT 3*.

BE CAREFUL OUT THERE

After starting your career, you receive a ton of information at the beginning of each mission. This includes a highly detailed crisis briefing, an Entry screen providing a detailed map of the operation, and lists of suspects and civilians who are held hostage. Next you'll outfit your officers with the right gear for the job, and there's a lot of it. The *SWAT 4* armory includes an assortment of weapons such as the Colt M4A1, a lightweight .45 caliber submachine gun built from polymers, a pepper-ball paintball gun that allows you to fire a controlled volley of CS gas balls; and the new Benelli M4 Nova Pump tactical shotgun. Add door wedges, stun guns, and C2 breaching charges to your arsenal, and *SWAT 4* is packed with the right equipment for getting the job done.

Strong enemy A.I. makes keeping your team alive a tough job.

Mission so incredibly not accomplished.



Resisting the temptation to kill the freak with the graveyard in his basement might be the toughest part of the game.

> ***SWAT 4* somehow manages to top the grit and intensity of the excellent *SWAT 3*.**

All 13 missions are varied, challenging, and, thanks to random enemy placement, very replayable. Action is quick, and with the top-notch A.I., you'll need to stay sharp when clearing buildings. Perps are smart, quickly (and accurately) returning fire or running away. Unlike other tactical shooters in which A.I. teammates perform marginally at best, *SWAT 4*'s officers are proactive, reacting to situations so quickly that they dispatch bad guys before they can do any more harm. This gives the game a great realistic feel and lets you focus on the task at hand. It's a huge relief to finally play a tactical simulation without the hassle of micromanaging inept teammates.

A vastly improved HUD is simple and intuitive, and the context-sensitive commands make for a more efficient and enjoyable experience. No more getting mired in miniwindows—you now issue commands through a simple tap of the Space Bar (default) or through a series of colored, highlighted menus for a seamless execution of commands.

BREACH, BANG, AND CLEAR YOUR ROUTER

Unlike its predecessor, in which the multiplayer expansion pack was a year-later afterthought, *SWAT 4* comes packing a solid multiplayer game with about a half dozen game types for either co-op or adversarial play. VIP escort in adversarial mode is probably the most challenging team game, with one team having two minutes to escort a randomly chosen SWAT VIP teammate to an extraction point while the opposing force tries to assassinate him. Whatever mode you opt for, it's all incredibly tense and fun.

Simply put, *SWAT 4* is just about the best tactical shooter available. Its outstandingly realistic and gripping play delivers everything a tac-sim fan craves. Now, if you'll excuse me, there are more perps in need of cuffing.

Raphael Liberatore

Verdict ★★★★★

Gritty, gripping, great—*SWAT 4* is the new benchmark for tactical simulations.

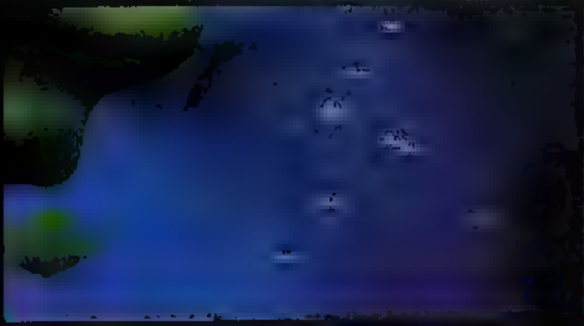
SUB BATTLE

Two hardcore naval sims hit the shelves at the same time—great news for fans of the genre. Happily, both are good buys, but one is a true classic.

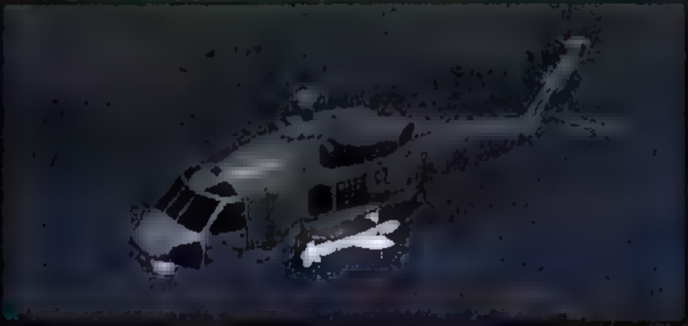
[illegible] Combat Simulations GENRE: Simulation ESRB RATING: None [illegible] Pentium III 550MHz, 128MB RAM, [illegible] RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, [illegible] PLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-16 players)

Dangerous Waters vs.

Which submarine sim...



Much of *Dangerous Waters* is played from this Navigation screen.



In *Dangerous Waters*, you can hunt not only with subs, but for subs.

With the PC simulation genre so close to death, it's surprising to see two serious naval sims hitting the shelves almost simultaneously. *Dangerous Waters* (available only at www.battlefront.com) and *Silent Hunter III* both simulate naval warfare, but it'd be a mistake to think of them as redundant. The former is a modern-weapons-platform simulator, placing you in command of not only submarines but also naval helicopters, aircraft, and ships. The latter is a simulation of life as a WWII German U-boat commander. While both allow you to take charge of a submarine in a wartime environment, the style and focus of each is completely different in almost every aspect.

RUN SILENT

Dangerous Waters reflects the electronic battlefield of modern warfare, with most of your time spent staring at digital displays, interpreting and manipulating massive quantities of data in order to find and kill the enemy before they find and kill you. The contemporary instrumentation of war is complex, so thankfully the game comes with tutorial missions, videos, and a 570-page manual. On the other hand, *Silent Hunter III* drops you into a world of primitive equipment, where finding the enemy often depends on a combination of good eyesight and luck. In *Silent Hunter III*, you have to get close enough to eyeball your prey, which makes combat a riveting, personal affair (especially if you choose to man the guns yourself to take out enemy merchant ships and the like).

In addition to submarines and a frigate, *Dangerous Waters* allows you to command the MH-60R helicopter and the P-3C Orion airplane. You can actually fly the aircraft with a joystick if you'd like, but this is by no means a flight sim, and the piloting aspects are rather simplistic. Instead, in keeping with the overall emphasis of the simulation, you'll spend your time operating the electronics and acquiring and prosecuting contacts. This is a complex and deep simulation, and even when utilizing "Autocrew" to man some stations, it will take a lot of time to learn. For example, you'll have to figure out when to drop a DIFAR versus a VLAD sonobuoy, how to manipulate the TMA to develop a firing solution, and much, much more. While the action can be fast, tense, and exciting, there's a

DANGEROUS WATERS

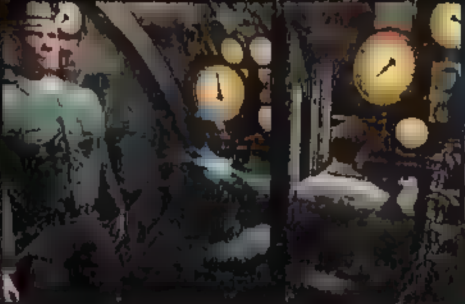
[illegible]

Verdict ★★★★☆

Dangerous Waters is a superb modern-naval-combat simulator, but...

Silent Hunter III

...reigns supreme?



Managing your crew is part of the challenge in *Silent Hunter III*.

A rousing send-off as you leave port in *Silent Hunter III*.

CATEGORY	SILENT HUNTER III
Scope	The role of a WWII German U-boat [illegible]
Graphics	[illegible]
Difficulty	[illegible]
Campaign	[illegible]

Verdict ★★★★★

...*Silent Hunter III* is destined to be a Sim Hall of Fame all-time classic.

cold and impersonal nature to this type of warfare.

Even though combat in *Silent Hunter III* relies on simpler equipment, that doesn't mean attacking the enemy is easy: At full realism settings, you have to hand-calculate the angles, speed, and distance to the target, the gyro setting for your torpedo, and more before firing—although you can allow your computer weapons officer to do the math for you. But those full realism settings aren't mandatory—a wide range of difficulty modes make this game incredibly accessible and gamers who never thought they'd enjoy a sub sim may find themselves hooked.

RUN DEEP

There's a fundamental difference in the feel of these two sims—not so much a better/worse contrast, but a critical distinction that will determine which you'll prefer. *Dangerous Waters* simulates modern naval warfare in all its complexity, with a plethora of options in terms of weapons platforms you can command. It's a sandbox of sorts, with a superb mission and campaign editor, a solid quick-mission generator, and enjoyable multiplayer. The campaign has an interesting story in which Russian rebels have taken control of part of the Russian navy, China is looking for opportunities from the conflict, and the United States is being careful. While each challenge in this linear set of missions must be "won" to advance, every mission can be played from a variety of viewpoints, and your choices affect the story line. *Dangerous Waters* is the game for those wishing to explore modern naval combat.

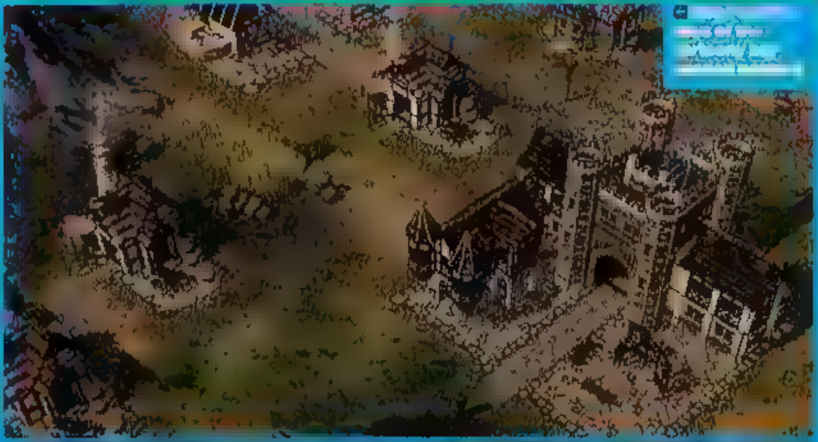
Silent Hunter III, however, seems destined to become a classic sim in the vein of *Longbow 2* and *Red Baron II* because it is, at heart, an RPG as much as it is a sim. You are a WWII German U-boat commander with a career played out in a completely dynamic campaign in which you can decide for yourself what defines success. Do you want to see if you and your crew can survive the entire war? Then you may be circumspect in the risks you take. Or do you feel it is your duty to throw caution to the wind and try to sink everything in sight? Then you will likely have a glorious and short career. There is no "winning" or "losing" the missions here. You gain fame if you do well, and you can upgrade equipment and crew by trading on that fame. Combine the superb sim aspects, the sweat-inducing nature of the warfare, and a truly dynamic career campaign mode, and you have one of the best simulations ever released for the PC. ■ **Jeff Lackey**

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Blue Byte** GENRE: **Real-time, Real Slow Strategy** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB install** RECOMMENDED: **512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-6 players)**

Heritage of Kings: The Settlers

Oh, you'll be settling all right

[illegible]



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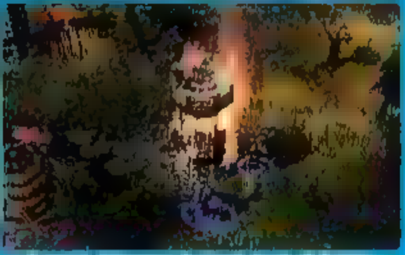

[illegible]

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

[illegible]

> Like David Hasselhoff's singing career, *Settlers* is popular in Germany and just sort of barely tolerated elsewhere.

Verdict ★

[illegible]

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ATI.com

Tech

It's short for "technology"

MANUFACTURER
Falcon Northwest
[illegible]

100
Call the X-Files—the fastest laptop we've ever tested is a Dell.

102
Biting back at Razer's Diamondback gaming mouse.

106
The last AGP videocard you'll ever need.

FALCON DIGS IN TO SLI

Falcon Northwest Talon PC

I've been a fan of Falcon Northwest ever since a friend bought one of its high-end Mach V systems years ago. I couldn't believe the price, but after spending a few minutes playing *Rainbow Six* and *Myth II*, I was sold. Simply put, Falcon is tops at building wicked-fast high-end gaming systems. But there has always been one major caveat when considering purchasing a Falcon gaming rig: You need deep pockets.

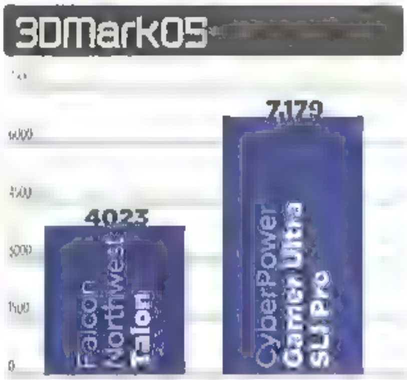
Enter the newly revamped Talon. Falcon has created a more affordable SLI-ready gaming system designed specifically for budget-conscious gamers wanting the best components at a practical price. It's a screamer of a system, but it's also a classy looker, thanks to its notably quiet (47 dB) Silverstone aluminum case. This case comes with extra thermal cooling, oodles of front- and rear-panel USB and FireWire ports, four optical bays, and a heavy-duty 650-watt 24-pin power supply for pumping out the raw power it needs. The Talon line is pretty open and not locked in to a restrictive form-factor, so configuring and upgrading are perfectly viable—gamers are free to buy whatever they want to slap into their computers down the road.

Save for a couple of hiccups, the Talon charged through our 3D GameGauge benchmark tests with good results. The combination of an AMD Athlon 64 3800+ processor with a Zalman heat sink and fan, a feature-rich Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard, 1GB of PC3200 DDR RAM, two Seagate Barracuda SATA hard drives in RAID 0, and a couple of BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT PCI Express graphics cards gives this system its muscle.

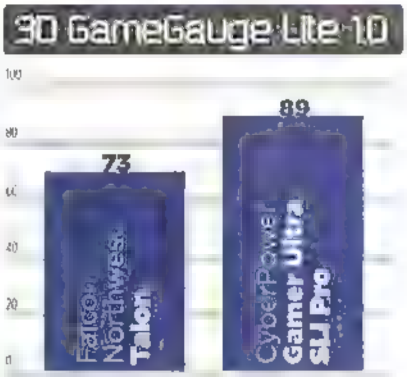
The machine posted very nice *Doom 3* and *Halo* scores, reaching nearly 100fps using our standard 3DGG 1280x1024 2x AA and 4x AF test parameters. However, the rig did run more slowly than expected when testing the CPU-taxing *Unreal Tournament 2004* benchmark, leading to a lackluster average score of just 48fps. Why? The lower-cost AMD Athlon 64 3800+ processor is to blame. Mind you, it's no slouch, but it's no FX-55 either. For sound, the Talon relies on the excellent integrated eight-channel motherboard audio from Asus, but Falcon does offer the option of upgrading to an Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro for high-end audio.

When comparing this machine to the four-star SLI rig we reviewed last month (the CyberPower Gamer Ultra SLI Pro), a few things stand out. For one, both cost $3,260, but the CyberPower's price doesn't include the Talon's slick LCD monitor, wireless devices, and headphones. You could drop those from the package and save another $800. And while the benchmarks below would seem to make the Talon less desirable, look hard at the 73fps score in 3D GameGauge Lite—anything over 60fps is a bonus imperceptible to the human eye. This is a good system at a very solid price. ■ Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★☆



3DMark05



3D GameGauge Lite 1.0

ALL TESTS RUN W[illegible] ANISOTROPIC FILTERING TURNED [illegible] WISE NOTED [illegible] **Widow PC** [illegible] **$3,600**

TURNING UP **THE HEAT**

Sting 9096 Gaming Laptop

Hey, didn't we just review the Sting in issue #249? This one sure looks the same, the specs are about the same, so why bother? I'll tell you why. Because six weeks in tech time is just about a generation. Because inside this Sting laptop is an ATI videocard that simply blows away the previous Sting's. That's why.

This chip isn't overclocked (ironically, the CPU seems to be *under*clocked, most likely to reduce heat), and yet there were big differences in the benchmark scores between the new ATI Radeon Mobility X800 256MB DDR3 PCI Express videocard and the former GeForce Go 6800 model. The Widow PC Sting 9096 ran through 3DMark05 at 1280x1024x32 with 2x AA and 4x AF enabled at 2,648, nearly 600 points better than its former GeForce Go 6800 model. The *Far Cry* benchmarks showed a slight increase, while the *Halo* and *UT2004* benchmarks stayed about the same. Interestingly, the *Doom 3* scores dropped slightly from 40fps to 38fps, possibly due to the vanilla Pentium 4E clock settings and lack of X800 overclocking parameters.

Widow PC doesn't fix what's not broke, retaining this 12-pounder's vibrant built-in 17-inch ClearView WSXGA widescreen LCD display, which provides for high portability yet awesome gaming and movie playback at a whopping 1680x1050 resolution at a 16:10 aspect ratio. The Sting still sports a rock-solid Clevo notebook chassis housing Clevo's D900T Intel 915P Grantsdale PCI Express motherboard, Intel's Pentium 4E 3.6MHz LGA 775 processor, 2GB of Apacer Technologies 533MHz DDR2 RAM, a Fujitsu 60GB SATA HDD, and plenty more bells and whistles. As with all recent Clevo series notebooks that host tons of FireWire, USB, and memory card ports, its lithium-ion battery barely lasts two hours, while the underside of the chassis gets superhot—this is a laptop you don't actually want on your lap for any extended period of time.

And yet, all this comes at a price point almost $1000 more than the Dell reviewed on this same page. What you're getting for that extra money is Widow PC's excellent support. Granted, that support is the best, but that is still a ton of money.

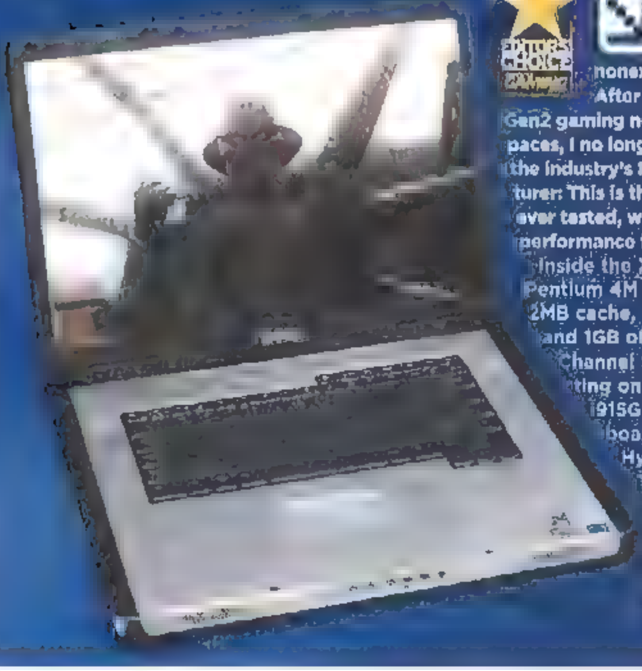
You'll have to decide whether that extra safety net is worth it (and, ideally, shouldn't you not need it anyway?). If you do spring for it, remember—this scorcher doesn't ship with oven mitts. You'll have to supply your own. ☒ **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★☆

[illegible] **Dell** [illegible] **$2,870**

DUDE, **GET A DELL**

Dell Inspiron XPS Gen2 Notebook



At one time, Dell's gaming credentials were pretty much nonexistent. Not anymore. After taking its Inspiron XPS Gen2 gaming notebook through its paces, I no longer wonder why Dell is the industry's No. 1 computer manufacturer: This is the fastest laptop *CGW*'s ever tested, with enough power and performance for any mobile gamer.

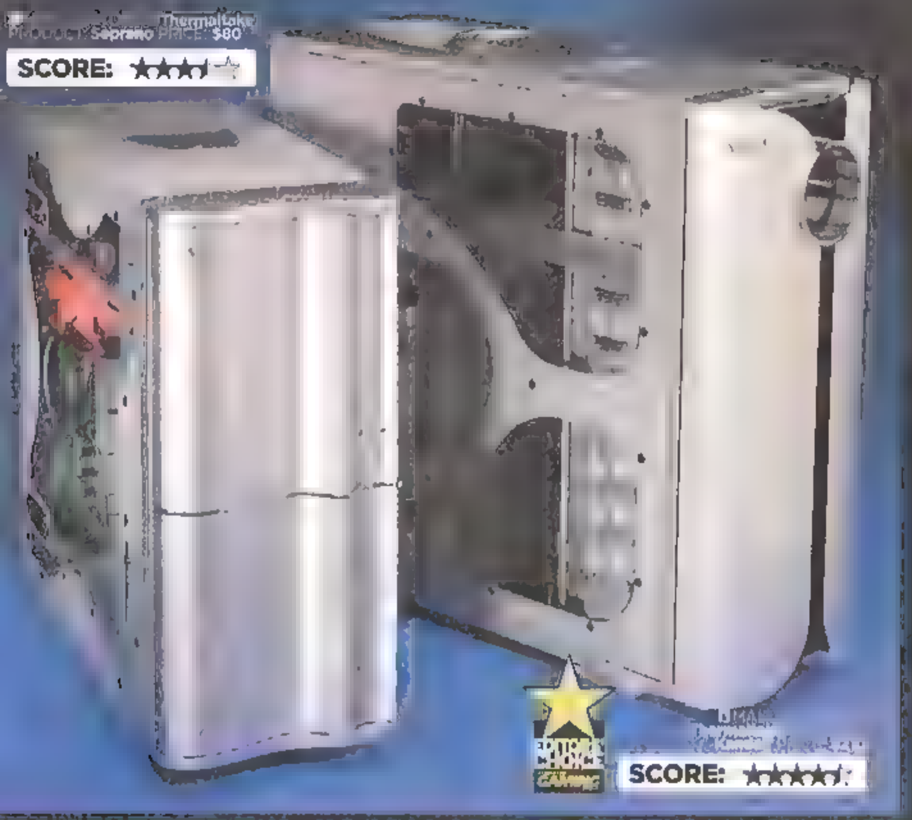
Inside the XPS Gen2 reside a Pentium 4M 2.13GHz 770 CPU with a 2MB cache, a 533MHz system bus and 1GB of Samsung's Dual Channel 533MHz DDR2 RAM sitting on Dell's proprietary Intel 915GML chipset motherboard. It does lack Intel's Hyper-Threading Technology but more than makes up for it with raw speed. Dell marries this Intel processor with Nvidia's new GeForce Go 6800 Ultra PCI Express GPU for a serious gaming notebook that rivals most midrange or lower desktop systems. Unlike other recent gaming notebooks using SATA drives for storage, Dell chooses an Ultra ATA form-factor with a Hitachi Travelstar 5K80 5,400 rpm Ultra ATA HDD, along with a Philips CD-RW/DVD combo drive for optical media.

The proof of this baby's speed lies in benchmark testing, where it blew out both 3DMark05 and our 3D GameGauge benchmarking suite with remarkable scores of 3,562 and 70, respectively. It just flat-out ripped through each test and begged for more, highlighting an amazing level of performance, especially when compared to the recent Alienware and Widow PC notebook scores.

At $2,600, not only is this the fastest notebook on the market, it's priced to move. Compared to Widow PC and recent Alienware Area-51m notebooks, Dell offers a lighter setup at nine pounds, less heat, and longer lithium ion battery life—and it's a WHOLE LOT CHEAPER. It also comes standard with a 17-inch UltraSharp WUXGA display, offering more viewing area than a standard 17-inch WXGA notebook screen for watching *The Incredibles* on DVD or playing *Rome: Total War* in all of its historical luster.

Bragging about owning a gaming rig from Dell is now justified—especially if you have an Inspiron XPS Gen2 notebook on your lap.
☒ Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★★



PRODUCT: Thermaltake Soprano PRICE: $80

SCORE: ★★★½☆

EDITORS' CHOICE Gaming

SCORE: ★★★★½

CLASSY CHASSIS

Thermaltake Kandalf and Soprano cases

Once upon a time, PC cases were big beige blocks. Not anymore. Nowadays, a case's form is almost as important as its function, and Thermaltake is offering gamers a number of options. Among these are the Kandalf, a stylish aluminum supersized tower meant for modders and those wanting the top of the line, and the Soprano midtower, a Tsunami Dream imitation that's priced to move.

The more feature-rich Kandalf offers plenty of innovation, starting with two form-factor options—ATX and BTX—with the BTX option available as an upgrade kit. The Kandalf has a unique detachable front-door design, with the two doors swinging open to reveal a whopping nine grilled drive bays (for both 5.25-inch and 3.5-inch drives) and a strategically placed pull-out accessory drawer (perfect for extra screws, etc.) at the bottom of the front panel.

The Kandalf allows for maximum airflow through its numerous grills and has optimized thermal management thanks to four built-in exhaust fans (two 120 millimeter and two 90 millimeter) at the front and top and a relocation-friendly 12-centimeter blue LED fan. The case also has dual USB, FireWire, audio, and speaker ports located at the top of the case beneath a hideaway access panel. Inside, there's lots of room for additional components. A removable HDD case (complete with fan and noise reducers) holds up to six internal 3.5-inch drives, allowing for plenty of HDD and floppy-disc-drive storage. You'll also find preset retaining pins for liquid cooling, screwless slots, extra-large thumbscrews, and side-panel locks.

The Soprano features a much smaller, lighter design, with plastic dual front doors, two 120-millimeter fans, and one 90-millimeter side-panel fan, necessary for optimal cooling circulation. If you're into security, the Soprano offers two sets of locks—one for the front door, and one for the windowed side panel. It also hosts space for seven expansion bays, with four 5.25-inch and two 3.5-inch bays. Like the Kandalf, the Soprano uses a toolless design, utilizing green plastic clips that make expansion-card installation and removal a breeze, though they seem less secure than those on the Kandalf. An access panel at the top of the case sports USB, FireWire, and audio (mic/line out) ports, similar to the setup on the more expensive case.

These are two very different but capable gaming cases. The Kandalf, though, gets the nod, thanks to its superior cooling and flexibility, perfect for gamers building high-performance rigs. ⊠ Raphael Liberatore

Tech Commando

Recently, Apple Computer joined forces with the likes of Dell, HP, Sony, LG, and a number of other high-profile electronics and PC makers by jumping on the Blu-ray bandwagon. For those unfamiliar with the Blu-ray Disc (BD) format, it is the next-generation optical-disc technology for recording, rewriting, and playback of high-definition video and PC data storage. Blu-ray drives will use a blue-violet laser, as opposed to the current red laser format of whatever you've got in your PC right now.

Typically, a single-layer BD has 27GB of optical data storage, while a dual-layer BD has up to 54GB—that's quite a difference from a DVD's 4.7GB single layer and 9.4GB dual layers of storage. The BD format will also include support for multilayer discs with storage capacities up to 200GB (25GB per layer). In addition, Blu-ray's more robust laser precision should boost data transfer rates from a DVD's 11Mbps to a blisteringly fast 54Mbps for BD. The good thing is that Blu-ray will be backward compatible with DVD formats, while HD broadcasts utilizing the MPEG-2 TS format can be recorded directly to the Blu-ray disc without any picture quality degradation or tricky processing.

When the Apple "Think Different" collective agrees with Dell, HP, and Sony, you can bet change is in the works. Blu-ray recorders are slated to arrive in the coming months, replacing traditional DVD players and DVDs by 2006, and Blu-ray should become the next-generation technology standard for PC optical data storage and games sooner rather than later. Scoff if you want, but this isn't Digital Audio Tape—with Apple's adoption of the tech (as with USB and FireWire previously), Blu-ray is a done deal. ⊠ Raphael Liberatore

> **When Apple agrees with Dell, HP, and Sony, you can bet change is in the works.**

MANUFACTURER **BenQ** PRICE **$350**

MY EYES! **MY EYES!**

FP71G+ LCD Monitor

At first, I was psyched. Just imagine it, a sharp-looking flat panel that boasts 8ms response times. That should mean silky-smooth movement as I lurk in demon-filled corridors. Then imagine my disappointment upon not finding a single DVI input on this LCD. No component inputs. No S-Video. Nothing. Just a plain old analog VGA port lingers on this monitor. Hurray.

Usually, the omission of DVI is a way to reach a cheaper price point. But when it sacrifices performance, you're getting a bum deal. For gamers, seeing crawling jaggies and blocky onscreen artifacts along steam pipes in *Doom 3* at 1024x768 resolution is rough. Seeing entire texture chunks linger in midair a fraction of a second longer than they are supposed to, though, is really unacceptable. We even dropped the resolution down to 800x600, only to get similar results. One would expect better from a PC using an Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra videocard.

Fortunately, the monitor fared better when simulating daylight conditions. The FP71G+ worked well when playing through the washed-out sepia-toned levels of *Brothers in Arms*, no noticeable artifacts or excessive jaggies. Outside of games, text was reasonably sharp and easy to read, and the brightness levels were evenly distributed around the panel.

The retro, two-tone black-and-silver plastic case is kind of cool and may distract you for a couple minutes from the lackluster performance, but the wobbly base and mere 30 degrees of vertical tilt will take you back to harsh reality. Look, if you're gonna drop any kind of money on a monitor, it may as well work right. Otherwise, you can just go back to staring at the wall. It'll hurt less. **Darren Gladstone**

SCORE: ★★½☆☆

Even at 800x600 resolution, the results were unacceptable.

Logitech $50

THE CONTENDER

MX 518 Gaming-Grade Optical Mouse

For some time now, Logitech has been the leader in providing gamers with a plethora of top-quality keyboards and mice. So when Razer recently introduced its gaming-specific Diamondback optical mouse, Logitech felt compelled to take the gloves off and come out swinging. The result is the MX 518 optical mouse, complete with high-performance resolution and revamped processing.

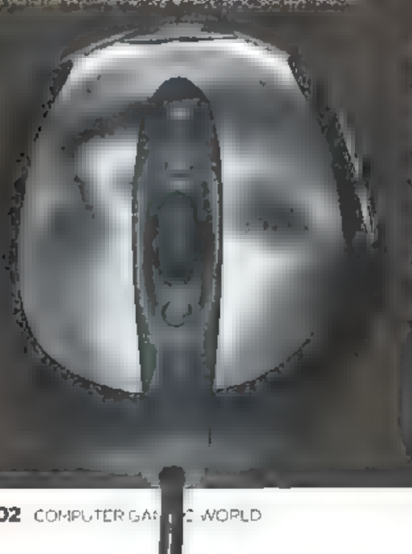
When throwing the MX 518 on the mat against the Diamondback, the first thing you'll notice is that the MX 518 is slightly bulkier than its rival; however, the Logitech mouse retains the same ergonomic flair of its MX 700 and 510 siblings, sporting enhanced design features such as eight programmable buttons along with a contoured gully housing two strategically placed buttons for better thumb control during rapid twitch movement. Both mice also use special gaming feet for smoother but reactive motion on the fly, but the edge goes to Razer's Teflon pads, which respond faster on the mat.

As for performance specs, the Logitech MX 518 uses a similar type of optimized optical engine, complete with a 16-bit data path and 6,000 bits/second throughput for overcoming the limitations built into Window XP's fixed USB polling rate. This raw speed translates into fluid and precise high-speed motion, perfect for fast-paced shooters like *Half-Life 2* and *Star Wars Republic Commando*. With an ultrahigh 1,600 dpi resolution, maximum acceleration of 15g, and gigantic 5.4 megapixels/second image processing rate, this mouse excels at reacting to the treacherous carnage in *Prince of Persia's* island stronghold.

At the final bell, the MX 518 basically scores a draw against its lesser-known but potent adversary—this mouse essentially offers everything that the Razer Diamondback provides. In the end, the match will most likely be decided by price or the feel of the mouse in the user's hands. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★½

The MX 518's raw speed translates into fluid and precise high-speed motion, perfect for shooters.



MANUFACTURER **Apple** PRICE **$3,000**

IT'S **HUUUUGE**

30-inch Apple Cinema HD Display

I know a good thing when I see it, and the humongous 30-inch Apple Cinema High-Definition Display is definitely a good thing. But is it worth the hefty $3,000 price tag? That depends on if you can afford to add an expensive dual-link digital signal specification capable videocard, like ones from the Nvidia FX Workstation series, the ATI FireGL lines, or even an Apple G5 computer with GeForce 6800 Ultra DDL videocard. Until the dual-link TMDS (transition minimized differential signaling) standard becomes readily available, your biggest problem will be locating a dual-link DVI videocard for running this baby. Thankfully, though, somehow a dual single-link videocard, the Asus V9999GE GeForce 6800 graphics card managed the job.

Just like its smaller 23-inch and 20-inch siblings, the 30-inch Apple Cinema HD is encased in aluminum with its bezel ergonomically positioned, allowing the monitor to swivel and move precisely. It's a gorgeous monitor, showcasing Apple's flair for ergonomics and style. Unfortunately, as with the smaller models, except for the brightness buttons there's a dearth of the LCD menus needed for configuration. Apple obviously expects you to marry this unit with one of its G5 or PowerBook systems, which have built-in calibration settings, or just use the PC videocard properties. However, this problem is easily overlooked, considering the awesome image quality and display footprint this gigantic LCD delivers.

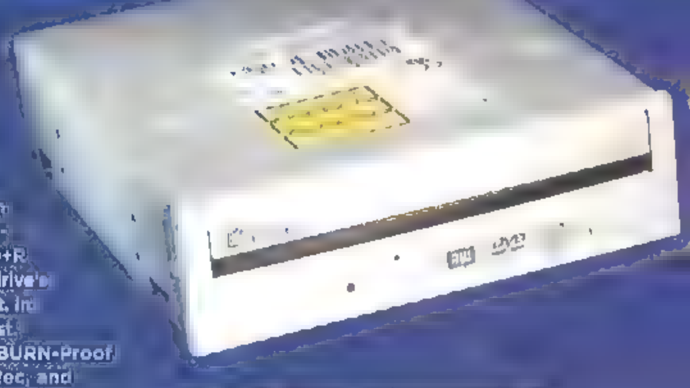
Just about anything shown on the Apple Cinema HD's incredible 2560x1600 resolution is thrilling. Even though its brightness is rated at 270 cd/m2, the Apple's 400:1 contrast ratio seamlessly showed all the dark labyrinths of *Doom 3*. Colors are vibrant and uniform, and at a 16ms response rate, ghosting issues and jaggies are minimal in fast-paced shooters like *Unreal Tournament 2004*. The monitor displayed some color distortion and jaggies using the single-link DVI V9999GE videocard when running the final dance scene from the *Chicago* DVD, but it ran flawlessly on the Apple G5 with the GeForce 6800 Ultra DDL graphics card.

> **Is it worth the steep $3,000 price tag?**

If you can afford the price and are willing to fork out extra for the right video solution, then maybe, Mr. Moneybags, this LCD is worth it. But average folks won't get enough out of this LCD to justify the expense.

Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★½



Plextor PRICE **$125**

BURN, **BABY, BURN**

Plextor PX-716A 16x DVD3RW Optical Drive

Plextor's PX-716A 16x DVD+/-RW Dual Layer Optical Drive is one of the first drives to write both DVD-R and DVD+R media at 16x, making it a truly outstanding choice for all of your optical-storage needs. When you consider its 4x DVD+R dual-layer recording speeds and its ability to burn CD-Rs at 48x, Plextor is leading the DVD recorder pack once again.

But should gamers really care? Seriously, why would anyone need to take advantage of the increased capacity (up to 8.5GB) that dual layer provides? Well, hardcore gamers like me are going to have over 5GB of assorted *Myth* series third-party maps, plug-ins, total conversions, saved-game films, and more. A dual-layer DVD has more than enough room to store all your *UT* mods, and this drive boasts the raw speed to get it burned sometime before you reach retirement age.

During testing, the Plextor PX-716A set the recording speed bar using a variety of DVDR, DVD+R DL, and CD-R media, burning 4GB of data in just over five minutes, in addition to writing an entire 8.5GB DVD in less than 18 minutes. With SpeedRead enabled, the drive burned an entire audio CD-R at 48x and CD-RW discs at 41x. With an 8MB buffer along with excellent bitsetting rates for DVD+R and DVD+R DL media, the drive's writing quality was excellent. In English—it was good and fast.

Plextor's AutoStrategy, BURN-Proof, PoweRec, Q-Check, GigaRec, and VariRec advanced technologies make this one of the most feature-rich DVD writers currently available. However, I experienced some glitches, mainly with the PoweREC "Intelligent Recording" technology showing sluggish writing speeds, especially when writing to some DVD+/-R media. With PoweRec disabled, the PX-716A's writing quality dramatically improved. Top it off with a fantastic software bundle and you have a drive that's every bit worth the extra price. Hands down, this is the best recorder on the market right now.

> **Every big worth the extra price when compared to similar DVD writers.**

Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★

"1UP HAS THE FRIENDLIEST MESSAGE BOARD POSTERS I'VE EVER MET, HANDS DOWN. I'VE MET A TON OF GREAT NEW FRIENDS AND HAVE EVEN RUN INTO A FEW OLD ONES!"

[AMANDA]

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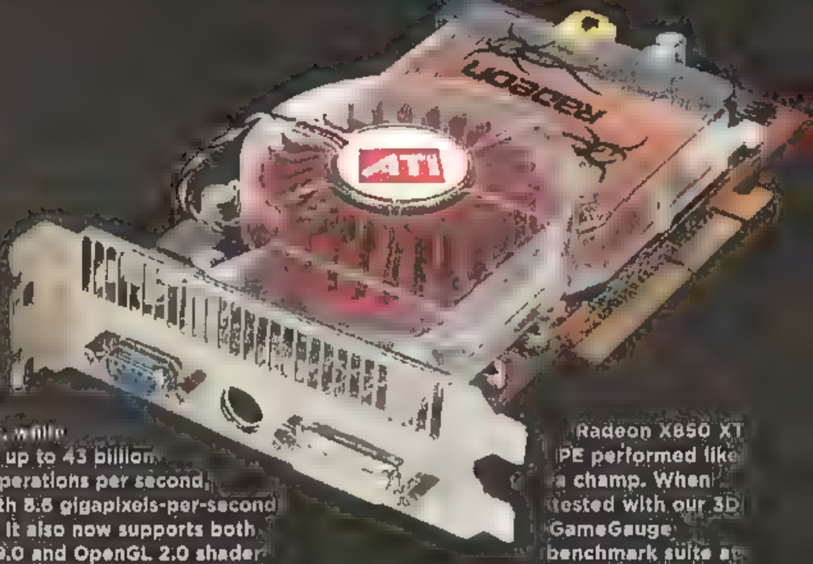
ATI PRICE $625

PDQ AGP

Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition 256MB GDDR3 RAM AGP Videocard



Not ready to upgrade to a PCI Express system but still want the best graphics you can buy? ATI has answered your AGP prayers with its new Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition graphics card. This card offers the same high-end performance as its X850 XT Platinum Edition PCI Express sibling. The only hitch is how to rationalize paying for a card that costs almost as much as a near-complete budget system.

With the X850 XT PE, ATI moves its R480 road map into an R481 design using a native AGP interface, which theoretically negates the need for ATI's PCI Express-to-AGP bridge solution (Rialto). With blisteringly fast framerates, the new Radeon X850 XT PE offers both a 590MHz memory clock and a 540MHz engine clock with 16 rendering pipelines, while boasting up to 43 billion shader operations per second, along with 8.6 gigapixels-per-second fill rates. It also now supports both DirectX 9.0 and OpenGL 2.0 shader models, as well as its own proprietary 3Dc compression technology. That's tech speak for "one powerful card." With its mammoth heat sink and fan, this card does well with overclocking, too. And, unlike the Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra, which requires a heavy-duty power supply, the Radeon X850 XT PE requires only a standard 350-watt power supply, which is good news for gamers with older systems.

When it came to benchmarks, the Radeon X850 XT PE performed like a champ. When tested with our 3D GameGauge benchmark suite at 1280x1024 resolution with 2x AA and 4x AF enabled, the card outperformed its sibling, the Radeon X800 XT, as well as the Nvidia 6800 Ultra, by more than 12fps in *Far Cry* and *Halo*. The X850 XT PE also outran both of these cards by a considerable margin in *Half-Life 2*. It wasn't even close.

This is a ridiculously powerful AGP card—and it comes at a ridiculous $625 price to match. Good luck justifying the purchase to yourself and/or spouse. ☒ Raphael Liberatore

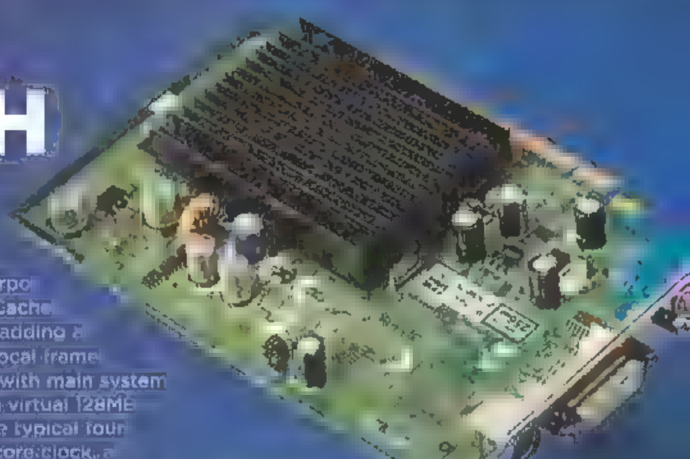
> When it came to benchmarks, the X850 XT PE performed like a champ.

SCORE: ★★★★½

Leadtek

SCROOGE TECH

Leadtek WinFast PX6200 TC TDH PCI-E Graphics Card



If you're looking to improve your *Doom 3* framerates, you might want to skip this review. Leadtek's budget-friendly GeForce 6000 series GPU is definitely not for the hardcore gaming crowd. Rather, it's for those looking to upgrade their entry-level systems' onboard video so they can enjoy *The Sims 2* or *Zoo Tycoon 2* in all their, er, visual splendor. If you're a typical gamer who can afford a PCI Express system with an AMD Athlon 64 processor and SATA II, then the 6200 shouldn't even register as a choice.

The GeForce 6200 is really Nvidia's counter to ATI's X300 for budget video. Head to head, Nvidia's 6200 outperforms the X300 across the board, and with DirectX 9 Pixel Shader Model 3.0 technology, and superscalar and UltraShadow II architectures, it's obvious the GeForce 6200 is the better choice.

Leadtek beefs up the 6200 line by incorporating Nvidia's TurboCache technology, basically adding a small 16MB or 32MB local frame buffer that coincides with main system RAM to operate like a virtual 128MB card. The card has the typical four pipelines, a 350MHz core clock, a 275MHz memory clock, and 400MHz RAMDAC for better frames over integrated OEM boards.

Originally, I tested the WinFast PX6200 using our standard 3D GameGauge Lite settings of 1280x1024 with 2x AA and 4x AF enabled. But after watching *UT* frames barely pass the 16fps mark while *Doom 3* crawled past at 7fps, I modified our 3DGG parameters in order to accommodate something worthy of a Mom-caliber machine playing *The Sims 2* and *Railroad Tycoon 3* at 1024x768 with both AA and AF disabled. *UT2004* frame scores jumped to 43fps, while 3DMark05 went from a mere 667 to a more respectable score of 1,263. Bottom line: This is not for hardcore gamers, but for budget-conscious or casual gamers wanting something somewhat better than onboard video. ☒ Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★½☆☆

It's what's inside that counts, and what's inside this Killer Rig is very, very fast.

KILLER RIG

FX-55 Centurion Revisited

We return to our UGM FX-55 Centurion in this month's Killer Rig, upgrading a couple components and system drivers while tweaking the BFGTech videocard in order to gain a few more frames with our favorite games.

The Guts

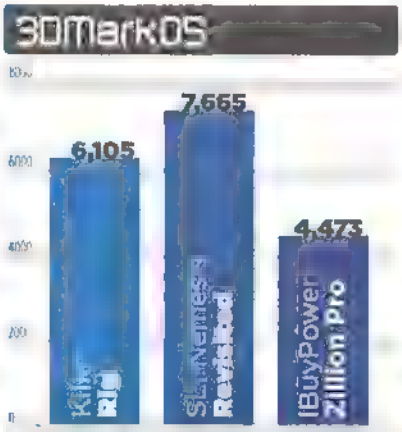
	COMPONENT	PRICE
[illegible]	Cooler Master Centurion CAC-T05-WWA aluminum midtower case w/ window panel	[illegible]
[illegible]	Microsoft Windows XP Professional with SP2	[illegible]
[illegible]	Thermaltake Silent PurePower 680-watt	[illegible]
[illegible]	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 2.6GHz, Socket 939, 1MB cache retail (with fan)	[illegible]
[illegible]	2x Vantec Stealth 80mm fans	[illegible]
[illegible]	Kingston HyperX PC4200 (KHX4300) 533MHz 4x 512MB DDR memory (2GB total)	[illegible]
[illegible]	2x Western Digital Raptor (WD740GD) 74GB HDD Serial ATA 10,000 rpm HDD	[illegible]
[illegible]	BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC w/TV-out 256MB GDDR3 AGP 8x videocard	[illegible]
[illegible]	Mad Dog MegaSTOR 6-in-1 16x Double Layer DVD+/-R+/-RW internal	[illegible]
[illegible]	Sony floppy drive	[illegible]
[illegible]	Philips Brilliance 230W5 HDTV-ready 23-inch LCD	[illegible]
[illegible]	Logitech Duo MX Cordless Keyboard	[illegible]
Mouse	Logitech MX1000 Wireless Optical Mouse	[illegible]
[illegible]	Logitech Digital Z-5500 5.1 Speaker System	[illegible]
TOTAL COST		$5,238

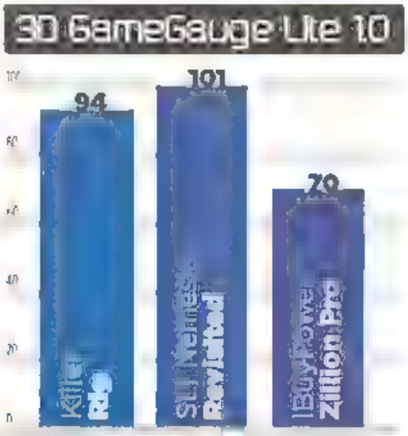
We basically kept the majority of this system's components—such as the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 processor, MSI K8T Neo2 series motherboard, Kingston HyperX DDR RAM, Mad Dog dual-layer DVD3RW optical drive, and BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 graphics card, along with the peripherals shown in the photo—simply because it already offers the type of unmatched performance we're looking for in our high-end rig.

However, we did swap Thermaltake power supplies, dropping the PurePower 480-watt power source for the newer PurePower 680-watt variant since the GeForce 6800 Ultra GPU begs for more juice than standard videocards. We also ditched the Seagate Barracuda hard disks and replaced them with a superfast pair of Western Digital Raptor 74GB 10,000 rpm SATA HDDs in a striped RAID 0 array, while adding the Hitachi Deskstar 400GB SATA hard drive for storage. Finally, since we're serious about overclocking, which screams for additional thermal dissipation, we added two more 80-millimeter fans from Vantec.

Next, we updated the MSI bios from version 3.2 to version 3.3 and updated the BFGTech GeForce video drivers with the latest Nvidia ForceWare 71.84 driver. This helped optimize our video tweaking and helped support our HD-capable Philips 23-inch LCD monitor. While the FX-55 CPU FSB frequency and bios voltage settings were previously overclocked, we did manage to overclock the GeForce card's memory and engine clocks, as well as tweak the DirectX and OpenGL settings using the nVHardpage 2.2 tweaker utility from www.guru3d.com. This allowed us to push the BFGTech card beyond our expectations, which resulted in the 3DGG score jumping almost five whole points while the 3DMark05 score increased by 1,000.

Raphael Liberatore





ALL TESTS RUN [illegible] WITH 2X ANTIALIASING AND 4X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) [illegible]

Tech **Medics**

ExtremeTech.com's big brains answer your questions

I bought a lot of new computer goodies a few days back, and I have 512MB of OCZ PC3200 enhanced latency RAM on the way. In my old motherboard, I had 512MB of PC3200, but it has a slightly slower latency than the new stuff. If I put it in with the new RAM for a total of 1024MB, will it cripple my system or help it out? The old RAM is Samsung that came in my Alienware computer, if that means anything.

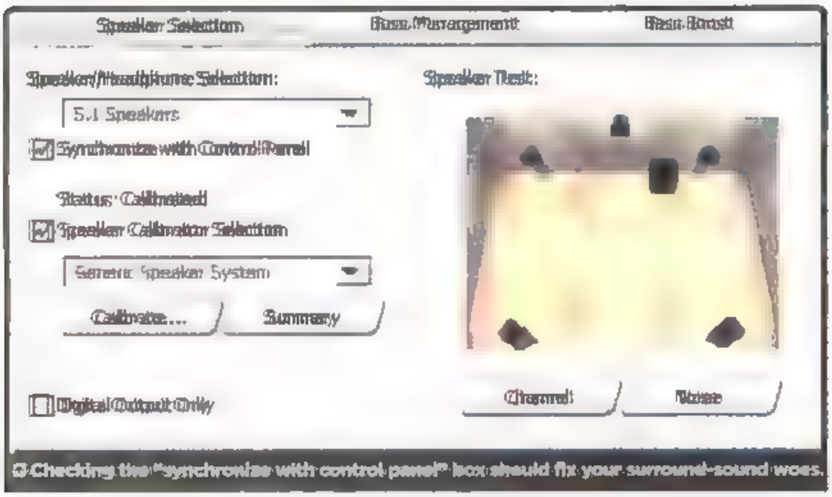
Patrick Monks

Loyd Case: You won't cripple your system, but you also won't gain the benefit of the new RAM's lower latency. The gain from the lower latency is fairly minor, though. You'll get more benefit from having 1GB of RAM in your system. You could run into one problem, however. Many motherboards will only accept six total banks of RAM. If your memory modules all have RAM on both sides of the module, then you probably have eight banks total and may have problems. If all the memory is single sided, or two of them are single sided, you should be OK.

I just got some Logitech 5.1 speakers, but when I play music, the sound only comes out of the front left and right speakers and the subwoofer—the front center and the rear speakers don't play. I set the options in the control panel for 5.1. They play in surround in *Doom 3* but not in *Half-Life 2*. When I hook them up to my girlfriend's PC, they play music in surround. I have checked everything—I don't know what the problem is.

Weavebirds on 1UP.com

Loyd Case: Since you didn't tell us if the soundcards on the two systems were the same or not, we can only guess. You said you checked the control panel. But some soundcards, like the Audigy 2, have control panels that don't necessarily sync with the Windows Sounds and Audio Devices control panel. So you should check to make sure they're synchronized. Alternatively, check your music player. Since you seem to be getting 5.1 sounds out of games, it's possible that the music player is somehow set for stereo. But we suspect that two different control panels are out of sync, since a game can bypass all the Windows panels.



Speaker/Headphone Selection: 5.1 Speakers

☑ Synchronize with Control Panel

Status: Calibrated

☑ Speaker Calibration Selection

Generic Speaker System

☐ Digital Output Only

Checking the "synchronize with control panel" box should fix your surround-sound woes.

Can you use DDR2 in a normal motherboard?

[illegible]

Loyd Case: By "normal," we assume you mean a current motherboard that uses older DDR (aka DDR1) memory. The short answer is no. The memory controller in the system must be designed from scratch to recognize new memory types. DDR2 is currently used only on Pentium 4 motherboards using the Intel 915 or 925 chipsets and Pentium 4 boards based on Via's PT894 chipset. (Some 915 boards can support older DDR1 memory, though.) Note that you can't accidentally plug the wrong type of memory into a socket. DDR2 memory modules have 240 pins, while DDR1 modules only have 184 pins.

I noticed that LCD flat panels have gotten a lot cheaper, but my gaming buddies tell me that CRTs are better for gaming. I'm getting tired of lugging around my 19-inch monster to LAN parties. Can I find gaming happiness with an LCD?

[illegible]

Loyd Case: There are fanatics for any technology, and monitors are just another example. You can indeed find gaming happiness with an LCD flat panel. Two things have prevented this in the past. First, the pixel response times—that is, the time it takes to turn a pixel on then off—have been way too high for fast 3D games. So you'd see all kinds of streaking and ghosting when playing a 3D game. The other issue is color rendition—you'd often see banding when subtle shades of color would transition.

The good news is that modern LCDs have gotten much better. The response times are now well under 16ms (the minimum needed for 60 frames per second), and we've even seen announcements of 4ms response times in LCD panels shipping this year. Color reproduction and contrast have also gotten better. A good CRT is now only marginally better for gaming, so give your back a break and get a good LCD panel. ⊠

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

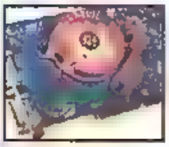
TECH REWIND

18 months of Tech scores at your fingertips

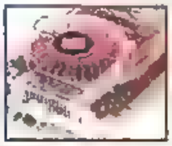
PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
ABS Mayhem G1	05/04	★★★½☆
ABS Ultimate M6	07/04	★★★★☆
Actiontec 54Mbps Wireless Cable/DSL Router	11/04	★★★★½
Alienware Area-51m 7700 Notebook	05/05	★★★★★
Altec Lansing MX5021	07/04	★★★☆☆
Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce4 PCI Express Socket 939 motherboard	05/05	★★★★★
Asus Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★★
Asus V9980 Ultra graphics card	05/04	★★★★☆
Asus V9999 Gamers Edition Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★½
ATI 9600 XT	05/04	★★★★
ATI Radeon X800 XT and XT Pro	08/04	★★★★½
ATI Radeon X800 XT PCI Express 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★½
ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition PCI Express	03/05	★★★★☆
ATI X600 XT	10/04	★★★½☆
Belkin Wireless Pre-N Router	03/05	★★★★½
Belkin Nostromo SpeedPad n52	04/05	★★★★½
BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express	05/05	★★★★★
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★½
BFGTech GeForce 6600 GTOC 128 MB DDR AGP Videocard	04/05	★★★★½
Bose Companion 3	07/04	★★★☆☆
Corsair XMS Xpert TwinXP1024-3200XL 512MB PC3200 DDR Memory Module	05/05	★★★★★
Creative GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 Speaker System	05/05	★★★★☆
	07/04	★★★½☆
Creative SoundBlaster Audigy 2 ZS Notebook	03/05	★★★★½

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro	06/04	★★★★☆
CyberPower Gamer Ultra SLI Pro	05/05	★★★★☆
Cyberpower Infinity 9900 Extreme	04/04	★★★★☆
Dell 2405FPW LCD Monitor	05/05	★★★★★
Dell Dimension 8300	06/04	★★★★☆
Dell Generation 3 Dimension XPS	10/04	★★★★☆
Dell Inspiron XPS	09/04	★★★★½
Dell W20040 LCD TV	09/04	★★★★½
D-Link DGL-4300 Wireless Router	03/05	★★★★½
D-Link GigaExpress DGS-1008D 8-Port Gigabit Switch	03/05	★★★★½
EDimensional Audio FX headphones	05/05	★★★☆☆
EMachines M6807	05/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox	10/03	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox 2	11/04	★★★★½
Falcon Northwest FragBox Pro	05/04	★★★★½
Falcon Northwest Mach V	06/04	★★★★½
Gateway 200 ARC	09/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 710G Gamer	06/04	★★★★½
Gateway FMC-901X	05/04	★★★★★
Gigabyte N68T256DH Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★☆
Hercules Prophetview 920 Pro DVI	03/04	★★★★½
Hypersonic Aviator AX6	05/04	★★★☆☆
IBuyPower Back to School Machine	09/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Gamer Extreme	03/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Zillion-FX	06/04	★★★½
IBuyPower Zillion Pro	04/05	★★★★½
Ideazon Zboard keyboard	12/04	★★★½☆
Intel D925XCV	10/04	★★★★☆
Logitech MX510 Optical Mouse	07/04	★★★★½
Logitech Z-5500	12/04	★★★★½

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2	04/05	★★★★★
NEC-Mitsubishi MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD	05/05	★★★★☆
NaturalPoint TrackIR 3-Pro	04/05	★★★★½
Nvidia 128MB GeForce 6600 GT PCI	12/04	★★★★½
Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra	08/04	★★★★½
Nyko PC Air Flo EX	12/04	★★★★☆
Philips Brilliance 190P5EB	05/05	★★★★☆
Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD	01/05	★★★★½
PC Laptops Annihilator 987	03/05	★★★★½
ProStar 9095-1B Pentium 4 3.0Gz	03/05	★★★★½
Razer Diamondback Mouse	04/05	★★★★★
Saitek Gamers' Keyboard	04/05	★★★★★
Saitek X52 Flight Control	04/05	★★★★
Sony SDM-P234	05/05	★★★★☆
Tapwave Zodiac	02/04	★★★★☆
Thrustmaster 2-in-1 Dual Trigger Gamepad	04/05	★★★★
Thrustmaster Enzo Ferrari Force Feedback Wheel	05/05	★★
Toshiba Qosmio E15-AV101	12/04	★★★☆☆
Toshiba Satellite P25-S670	09/04	★★★★½
U.S. Robotics USR5470 54Mbps Wireless Network Kit	03/05	★★★½☆
Velocity Micro Vision 64	10/04	★★★½☆
Vicious PC MSI MEGA 865	08/04	★★★★☆
Vicious PC Ninja	06/04	★★★★½
Voodoo Hexx c:355	06/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC Envy M:860	11/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC F50	10/04	★★★★½
VoodooPC Voodoo Doll	02/04	★★★★☆
Widow PC The Sting	03/05	★★★★½
XFX Force Nvidia GeForce6600 GT 128MB DDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★☆
Zalman ZM-RS6F Theater 6 headphones	03/05	★★★★½


GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB PCI Express Videocard

ProStar 9095-1B Pentium 4 3.0GHz EE Prescott LGA 775 Processor, 1GB RAM


ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition PCI Express

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

DEVELOPER **Irrational Games** PUBLISHER **Vivendi Univeral Games** GENRE **Strategy**

Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich

...Vs. Tom vs. Bruce

Bruce: For *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich*, Tom suggested we make characters with elaborate backstories so we can use the game's story mode to re-create the plot from one of his favorite comic books, which he coincidentally is replaying in his weekly *Champions* campaign at his house. I know how much the adventures of Dr. Wolverine or whoever mean to Tom, so how can I say no?

Tom: I don't even know what *Champions* is. So I Googled it and discovered that it's either a European soccer league or a pen-and-paper superhero RPG. Given Bruce's penchant for projecting onto me his own predilections, he could be referring to either.

As for story mode, that's just what Irrational Games calls it. It's easy enough to deathmatch in *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich*. But you have to go to the story mode to set up games with objectives like "defend the building," "kill the other guy's hero," "brood darkly," and various other comic-book pursuits.

However, since it's called story mode and since there are blank boxes into which you type text when you set up the game, we owe it to Irrational's fine game to just go with it. So here goes.

Welcome to the continuing adventures of Tom's League of Justice and Civility, Kinship and Selfless Service vs. Bruce's Team of Dastardly Insidious Craven Knaves Hell-bent on Evil and Destruction.

Bruce: That was a lot of work, and it wasn't even that funny if you're over 14. Tom calls this the "continuing adventures" because two years ago we played the original *Freedom Force* with its badly unbalanced multiplayer. I won by relying almost exclusively on the speed attribute, using vividly realized superheroes like Fast Guy and other characters I made who had his exact same stats but slightly different names (Speed Bullet Guy, for instance). But now Tom insists we try the newly balanced multiplayer with four separate characters.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Tom: Since this is a grudge match, I'll be rebuilding my characters from the last game.

DR. HYDROCHLORIC

The doctor is a feeble scientist who inadvertently put acid in his latte one morning and created a powerful concoction that converts his bodily fluids into acid. His flesh turns to stone and he gains fast healing. He can secrete acid from his hands to climb stone walls. He attacks by hocking acid loogies (an acid burn projectile with a small damage radius and three impact spawns) and spraying acid spittle (a powerful and expensive acid burn cone). Both attacks are improved to level 5 by years of practice out behind the lab.

FOUR EYES

Four Eyes is another scientist who isn't particularly fit (glass bones, thin-skinned) or brave (he has a 5 percent chance of panicking when he takes damage). But he's invented a pair of powerful glasses that fire powerful penetrating beams. In negative mode, the beams "cancellate," which temporarily deactivates a random enemy power. In positive mode, the beams are "dimensional rends," which irradiate the victim.

MISS ELECTRA

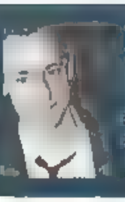
She was an instructor for a women's self-defense class who gained electrical powers when she used a hair dryer in the tub. The current coursing through her body makes her very strong, fast, nimble, and hardy. She has the power of Electrify, which hurtles her into an opponent while unleashing waves of stunning electrical charges. Her Shocking Girl Power attack is a high-damage, zero-energy-cost melee attack that has a 63 percent chance of stunning the victim.

However, Miss Electra isn't the most stable superheroine. She's hot tempered (meaning she'll randomly overcharge her attacks), has fluctuating powers (her attacks range between 0 and 300 percent damage), and is a berserker (whenever she's attacked, there's a 10 percent chance she'll become temporarily enraged, attacking random targets). Furthermore, the electricity running through her body gives her rapid metabolism, which makes her vulnerable to the acid in Dr Hydrochloric's loogies and the radiation fired

Dr. Hydrochloric (Dr. H to his friends)

> **Dr. Hydrochloric is a feeble scientist who put acid in his latte one morning.**

Players



Tom

Last month

Tom annihilates Bruce in an interstellar battle of *Laser Squad Nemesis*.

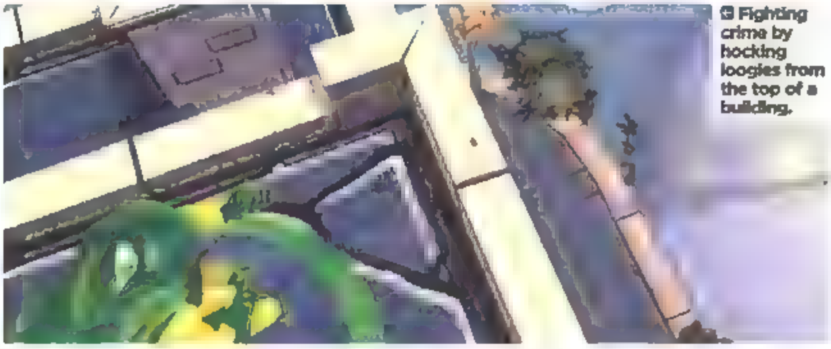
Bruce

Last month

Bruce contemplates hara-kiri as he wonders if he'll ever win again.

Miss Electra

Four Eyes



Fighting crime by hocking loogies from the top of a building.

from Four Eyes' glasses.

THE EARL OF LOVE

Earl was just a slovenly couch potato watching TV at home when a piece of the planet Venus entered our atmosphere and landed on his house. It made him beautiful (enemies must save versus hypnosis to attack him). But he is still a ponderous, slow-moving, weak-minded cosmic chump. The Earl is a huge fellow whose unstoppable endurance gives him hundreds of hit points. His Love Tap is a powerful melee attack, but his real weapon is For the Love of Earl, a stunning area hypnosis attack.

Bruce: Tom came up with the idea of me having a crew of historical figures that show up just like in an episode of the crappy season of *Star Trek* when the writers ran out of ideas. I don't even know what *Star Trek* is, so I had to Google it and found out that it's Tom Chick's favorite show. Ha! Noobs.

AUGUSTUS

This is apparently someone who was famous in Roman times, so I choose a Roman-looking skin and give him Roman powers like the Roman Smackdown, which is what happens when you take a melee attack, crank it up to the max, and then type "Roman Smackdown" into the place where the name goes.

HEINZ GUDERIAN

Since this is called *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich*, I figure I have to take at least one Nazi. The game doesn't actually have any special powers that allow you to command panzer divisions or encircle Smolensk, so I just choose a beam attack and call it Nazi Laser. It's long range but has only medium damage. That will be important later.

STALIN BOY

Don't kid yourself—multiplayer in this game is still broken. This is a reprise of my character model from the last *Freedom Force* game, with maxed-out speed, the Speeding Bullet ability (which does knock-back and stun damage), and a melee ability with very high magnitude and no energy cost. I change the names to make them sound appropriately Communist.

AL CAPONE

Never have any attack in this game do medium anything. So, of course, two of my characters have medium-damage attacks. Capone has a medium-damage crushing melee attack and a medium-damage electrical beam attack. Useless.

ISSUE ONE: BATTLE IN BERLIN!

Tom: We begin with my League of Justice and Civility, Kinship and Selfless Service locating Bruce's headquarters in Berlin, which is appropriate given that one of his guys is a Nazi. Our objective is to destroy the building, look for WMDs, and then appeal to the United Nations, in that order. Conveniently, Bruce's headquarters are located right next door to where my characters spawn. Everyone pops right over and commences pounding the building.

Bruce: In the finest UN tradition, Tom's job is to make a mess and then try to take credit for it when it gets cleaned up by someone else. Unfortunately, due to one thing leading to another, dereliction of duty, yadda yadda not in our name, my guys are actually nowhere near the headquarters they're supposed to be guarding. So it's no surprise when Tom starts blowing up my headquarters without me being able to do much about it.

Tom: When Bruce's heroes show up, the Earl of Love keeps attacking the building. Harnessing my own superpower of Playing Real Time Strategy Games Online at Full Speed Against People Who Are Good, I manage to right-click, select a few powers, and assign some targets. The battle is joined!

Bruce: I have no idea what's going on. I can't click on my guys fast enough to give them orders before they get knocked out or otherwise bothered by Tom's hooligans.

Tom: I gotta agree with Bruce on this one. Everything's moving pretty fast, and all I can see is a swirl of gaudy polygonal characters and colored superpower effects. As a single-player game, *Freedom Force* relies on pausing to give orders, which also lets you admire the action in the style of a comic book's freeze frames. But in multiplayer, there is no pausing, and the game runs only at maximum speed.

Bruce: Well, whatever the hell is going on, all I know is that Tom's fat guy manages to knock over my building in less than three minutes.

ISSUE TWO: THE LEAGUE OF J.A.C.K.A.S.S.' FINEST HOUR?

Tom: Deprived of their headquarters, Bruce's villains track down Tom's heroes, following them to their stately manor and launching a covert mission to assassinate the leader of the League of Justice and Civility, Kinship and Selfless Service.

This is like a deathmatch, but I have a leader who's worth 10 points to Bruce. Every other hero is worth one point. I meant to make the Earl of Love my leader, since he's the sexiest (and also has the most hit points and will therefore be hardest to kill). However, I am undone by my own organizational skills. Since I have arranged my characters in alphabetical order, the frail Dr Hydrochloric is at the top of the list and is therefore designated the leader. Great. He's got, like, 20 hit points and about a dozen attack vulnerabilities.

Bruce: Taking a page from Tom's book, I simply lasso all my characters and click on Tom's guy with the big red arrow pointing at him. Unfortunately, this doesn't work, since it only orders my first guy to attack while everyone else stands around. Thinking quickly, I select the other three characters and order them one by one to attack the red-arrow guy. Then I sit back to see what happens since I can't possibly click fast enough to do anything meaningful before the game ends.

Tom: Before I know what's happened, Dr. Hydrochloric is flat on his back without ever having hocked a loogie. Bruce has racked up 10 points. I'm not about to use Hydrochloric's Heroic Revival to let him get up and get killed again, giving Bruce 20 points. So he lies there while I handily kill Bruce's villains by making them fall in love with the Earl of Love while Miss Electra kills them with electricity. Unfortunately, each of his villains gives me only one point. Even if they each get revived and killed again, I'll

◀ have only eight points to Bruce's 10. Math has conspired against me.

Bruce: All of my heroes get knocked out, but somehow I still win. Those cheat codes from Ken Levine are working pretty well.

ISSUE THREE: WELCOME TO THE ASPHALT JUNGLE!

Tom: The score is tied, so the fate of the earth will be decided as it is in any comic book: with something vaguely resembling a professional wrestling match and every bit as contrived. We're playing tag mode, in which we each bring out one character at a time to go *mano a mano*. A character can use his Heroic Revival power to tag in another hero, this takes the tagger out of the game, but it keeps his opponent from getting a point for the kill. Careful to arrange my heroes in a particular order this time, I lead with Dr. Hydrochloric. I have a plan.

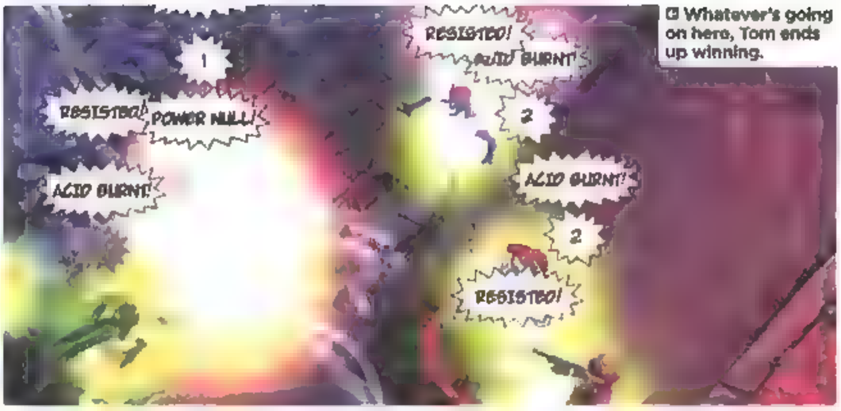
Bruce: So I start out with Stalin Boy, since he seems to be the only one of my heroes who can knock anyone out. This pretty much parallels our game two years ago, when high speed allowed me to avoid Tom's attacks while the Speeding Bullet ability stunned his heroes and let me close in to finish them off.

Tom: Bruce doesn't have any fliers. So Dr Hydrochloric climbs a skyscraper and starts hocking loogies down at Bruce's dude.

Bruce: All I can see are green splotches that look like puke or cow pies. They keep appearing on the street. I guess these are Tom's poo attacks or something. I'm going so fast that there doesn't seem to be any danger of actually getting hit. But once I realize Tom is hiding on top of a building, I can't figure out any way to attack him. Eventually Tom decides to come down, whereupon I kill him in about two seconds.

Tom: I didn't "decide" to come down. In an attempt to lead my target, I accidentally aimed at a spot out of Dr. Hydrochloric's range. So he assumed I wanted him to get down off the building so he could reach the spot. This was unwise, as he was quickly killed twice, each time with a single slap. Also unwise is having Four Eyes queued up next, because he comes out before I can tag in a more suitable melee hero.

Bruce: Having only one character to control makes it easier to actually use his powers. Stalin Boy's Speeding Bullet attack promptly sends Tom's first two characters to the gulag—multiple times, thanks to Tom's Heroic Revivals bringing them back.



Whatever's going on here, Tom ends up winning.

> **Those cheat codes come in handy when the game ends and tells me I won.**

Did you call a cab?

Tom: OK, two characters got wasted because I couldn't tag out fast enough. But now I've got Miss Electra and she's pissed. After a little toe-to-toe and some mutual stunning, the Russian thug goes down harder than a shot of vodka laced with dioxin.

Bruce: Tom's extensive game hacks seem to have made his glowing blue chick invincible. I manage to get her down to maybe half health before I'm knocked out. I revive, knock another 25 percent off her health, and die again. Next up is Al Capone, whose Prohibition Beam isn't doing much good. So I chip away at the blue chick's health a little bit and then tag in Augustus. His melee attacks seem to work a little better. By the time he's killed, revived, and killed again, he's made her use up her Heroic Revival.

Tom: What Bruce may not realize is that I keep getting shut out of playing the game because he's making Miss Electra go into her enraged state, attacking lampposts, cars, and buildings instead of villains. Women. I'll never understand them.

Bruce: I'm down to my last hero. Luckily, Heinz Guderian has a ranged attack strong enough to pick off the blue chick before she can hit me. Now Tom brings in some big fat guy who just keeps walking at me. I'm not sure what superpower he has. Maybe it's the power to keep walking toward someone. Every now and then he stops and ejaculates a wave of pink hearts. Frankly, I'm not sure I want to know what that's supposed to be.

Tom: OK, here's where having a slow guy gets really frustrating. I can't do a damn thing because Bruce keeps running away, stopping occasionally to take potshots at my hero for a dozen or so points of damage at a time. I manage to pop off For the Love of Earl a few times, but Bruce's Nazi is never quite close enough to fall in love with my fat man. I try to pick up a car to throw at him, but it just makes me even slower. So then I just start throwing cars around, hoping I'll create some sort of physics chain reaction that causes a building to fall on Bruce's Nazi.

Bruce: Those cheat codes come in handy again when the game ends and tells me I won. Tom says that the timer simply ran out and I won on points, which is fine with me since it still means he loses. He's probably running off right now to try to find a better strategy in an issue of *The Sandman*. Google that! ☒

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Scorched Earth

Mea-t Culpa

Greetings from beautiful Stockholm!

Games can be a lot like my old girlfriend Barbara: fun and exciting right up until you realize that adorable personality isn't so much enchantingly quirky as it is patently psychotic and given to stalking you and leaving weird presents at your apartment door at midnight for months after you've uninstalled, uh, broken up with her because you caught her phoning random office receptionists and shrieking like the Intergalactic Banshee Champion into the receiver. But by then it's almost too late—you've told everyone you love her, and even as you start making a wet bedsheet burrito with her as the savory filling you wonder, "How can I ever explain this? Where did I go wrong?" Maybe you should've gotten the hint when she made you hide in a closet from her roommate for over an hour. But I digress....

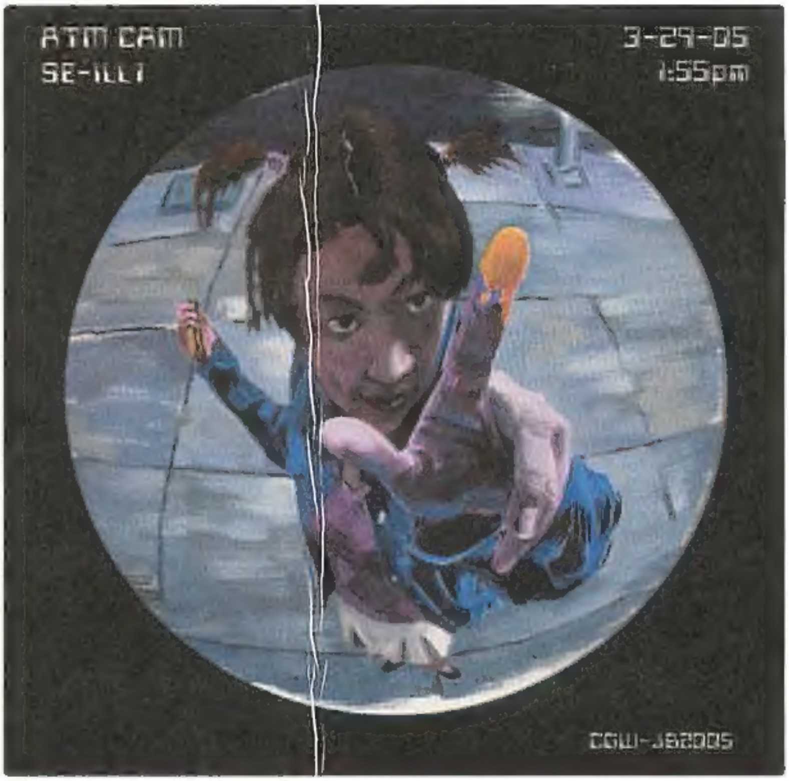

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK BALRIGT

The sorry truth is that sometimes you can try so hard to be the good and honest guy that you second-guess yourself into a lie, both to yourself and to the world. So it was for me and my insaniac ex-girlfriend, just as it was for me and *Meat Puppet*. As I had done with Barbara, I grossly overrated it, and I would now like to beg to carve at least two stars off that horribly wrong four-star rating. As for you, Babs, your rating stands, but only because those postcards you sent from New Mexico so truly terrified me.

I really, really wanted to like *Meat Puppet*—kinda like I really, really wanted to like Barbara. In fact, I felt obligated to like them both because on the surface it was obvious I should: They both looked pretty good and they both resembled earlier releases I'd enjoyed immensely (*Crusader: No Remorse* and an intriguing cross between the Jill with the nose ring and whatshername from that Halloween party, respectively). So what do you do? You blinker yourself, dismissing the warning signs of inevitable disaster as "being overly critical" or "it's just me." Well, guess what? I wasn't the one calling me "Daddy" at the most inappropriate moments, just like I wasn't the half-wit who came up with the insanely unresponsive control scheme, the stupid-ass time limit, and the grindingly unenjoyable gameplay. It was never me, it was them. Always them.

> **The road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions, and little chunks of your soul provide the mortar.**

You see, the danger in reviewing games is that sometimes you try so hard to see the forest for the trees that you discount the fact that every tree is on fire, poisonous, and falling on your head. You're held hostage, just like that time at the indoor ATM on 23rd Street at 1 a.m. when you first realized she'd been following you and was wearing her dress inside out and backwards, and with no other immediately handy reference point it's all too easy to think, "Oh, this is perfectly acceptable." To varying degrees, it happens to us all, though not so much the "having your girlfriend smear mustard from a hot dog bun she found on the street over the lens of the ATM security camera" part as the "try so hard to be objective and give something a fair shake that you get it totally wrong" part. The road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions, and little chunks of your soul provide the mortar.

But game reviewers are not the only ones vulnerable to self-delusion borne of cloistering. Gamers do it all the time. You wouldn't believe how many letters we get every month defending whatever game got a low rating. But I ask you, is *Starsky & Hutch* really deserving of such a spirited defense, or maybe, just maybe, you're pulling the Clarence Darrow act because you desperately want to believe you didn't just blow your monthly game budget to sink your teeth into a fecal doughnut? Or maybe that definitive collection of licensed Starsky & Hutch lunchboxes, posters, and novelty erasers in your closet is fueling your fevered rationalization. "No!" your mind cries out, "A *Starsky & Hutch* product could never fail to delight! It must just be you." It's not—the game sucks. Accept it and move on.

As badly as I feel about it, the upside is that I learned something from the whole sordid ordeal. First off, trust your instincts—listen to your beautiful cynical nay-saying heart and you won't get in trouble. Second, using makeup to paint a trail of teardrops on your face isn't a charming affectation but a desperate cry for help. A cry you're best off ignoring. ☒ **Robert Coffey** robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

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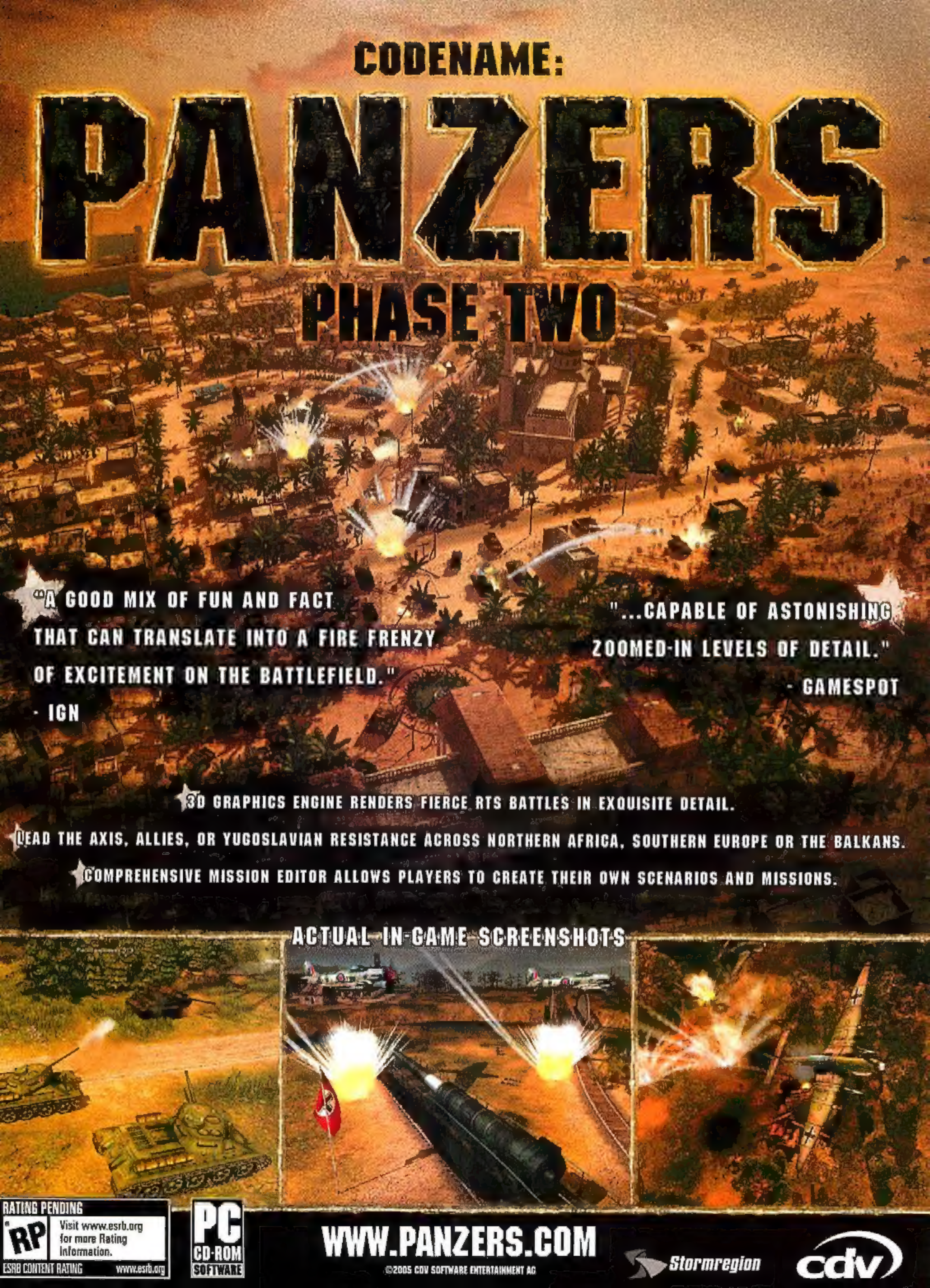

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PANZERS

PHASE TWO

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